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THE NFL BOOK

BILLS
17
NFL

2025 season breakdown inside

The ultimate guide to everything football

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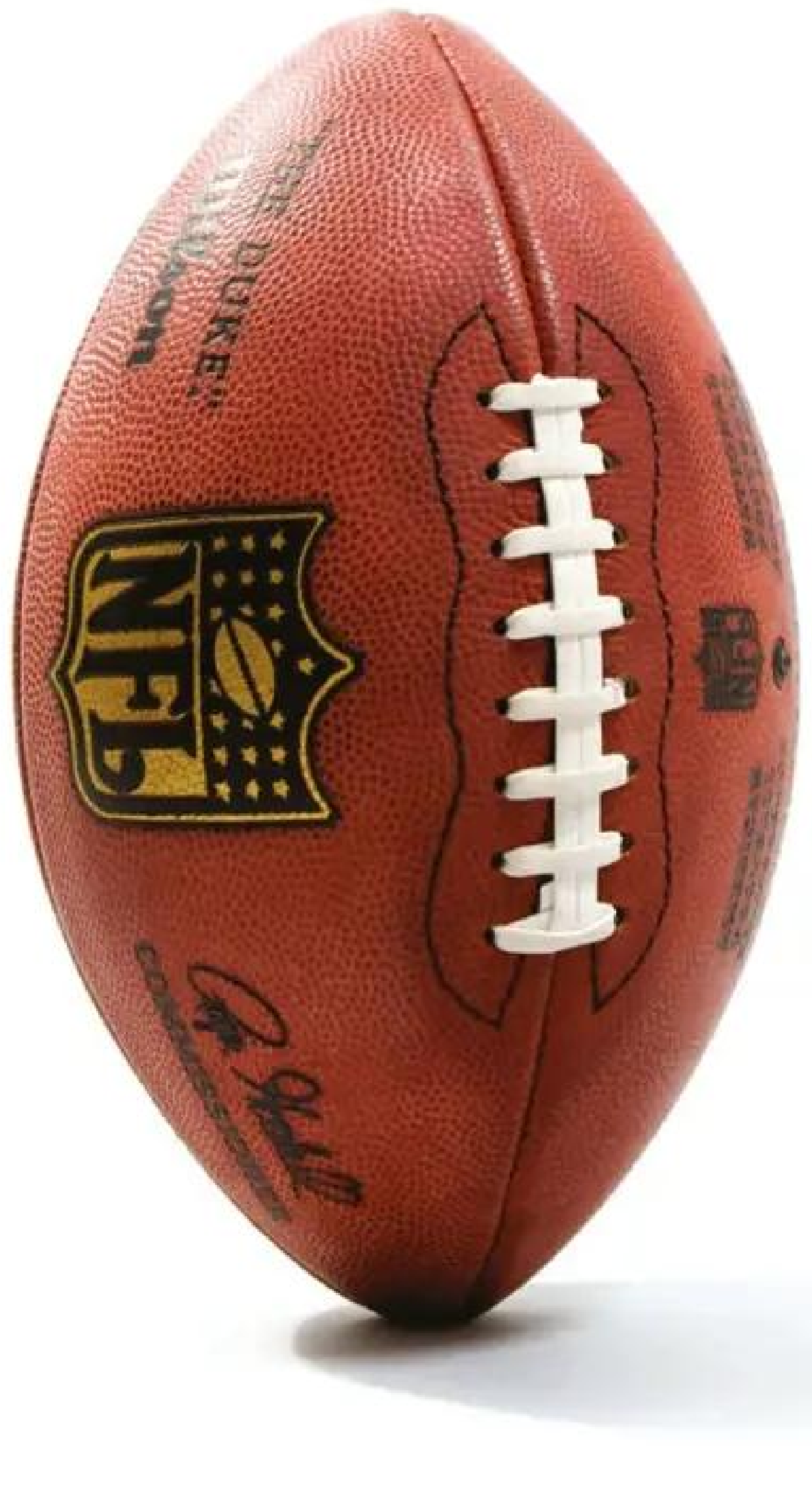
Digital Edition
FUTURE
TENTH EDITION

★★★ THE ★★★
NFL
BOOK

When it comes to thrilling sporting spectacles, there's nothing else quite like the NFL. A deep sport filled with complex strategies played by some of the most physically gifted athletes in the world, football has grown into one of the most compelling forms of sporting entertainment on Earth. With the incredible drama of Super Bowl LIX behind us, the 2025 season promises to be the best the league has seen yet.

The NFL Book is a complete guide to the United States' favourite sport – a celebration of football for newcomers and gridiron veterans alike. Tapping into the league's growing global popularity, this book covers everything you need to know, from the basic rules of football to the draft. It also profiles every NFL franchise, from the Buffalo Bills to the Seattle Seahawks, as well as counting down the greatest players and games in the history of the league. No matter who you follow, there's something for every football fan here.



FUTURE

★★★ THE ★★★ NFL BOOK

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THE
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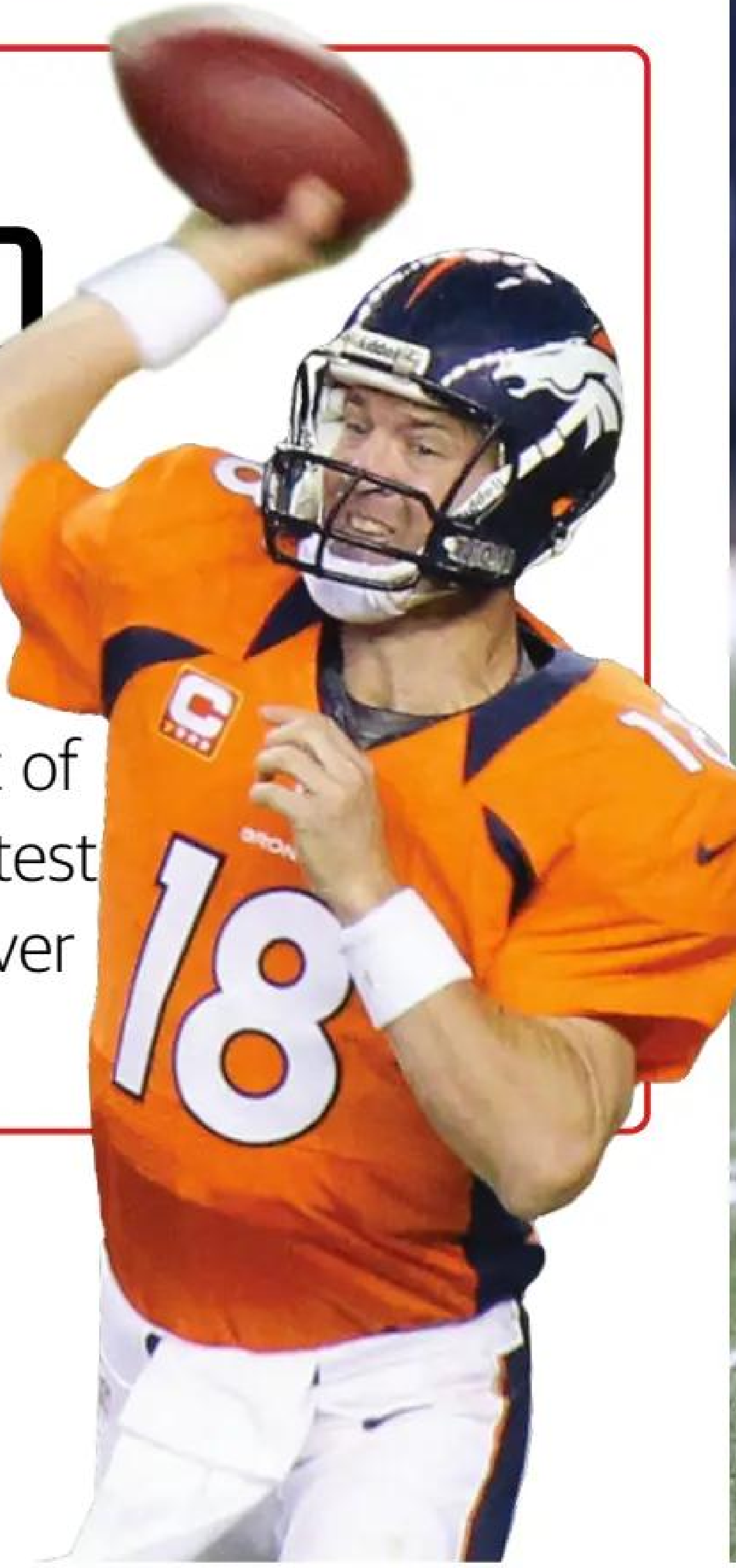

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NFL: ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW

From the draft to the playoffs and everything in between, get to grips with the most exciting sports league in the world

For a sport that involves so much speed, power and raw athleticism, the game of football is a deceptively subtle one. Anyone with even a passing knowledge of the game can revel in the excitement of a last-gasp Hail Mary pass or bulldozing touchdown run. But diehard fans can learn to appreciate devious dummy plays and moments of defensive inspiration just as much.

But it's best to start with the basics. Football can be intimidating for newcomers, with its complex plays, laundry list of rules and constantly evolving metagame. On the one hand, there's always something new and exciting to learn when watching the NFL, but on the other, a solid grasp of the fundamentals is an absolute necessity for anyone who wants to get the most out of their viewing experience. Fortunately we've got you covered here in The NFL Book.

This All You Need to Know section is exactly that: everything an NFL fan could wish to know about the sport of football, the NFL, the draft and more. Here we'll break down the history of the organisation that is the National Football League, its makeup and structure, the teams that compete in it, and the innovations that are driving the future of football forward. We've even included a handy jargon buster to provide quick definitions of some of the most important football terms at a glance.

No matter how familiar you are with the NFL, there's something for you here. It's the ultimate introduction to the most exciting sports league in the world, and perfect for burgeoning football fans and gridiron veterans alike.

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A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE NFL

The contrast between the globally marketed brand that is today's NFL and its humble dawn in an Ohio car dealership couldn't be more stark

Today the NFL is a mega-brand; an incredibly lucrative product. Not just America's biggest sports league but one which is recognisable in almost every country. But in 1920 professional football lived in the shadow of not only baseball, then indisputably the nation's favourite sport, but also that of college football.

Without a strong league structure, as was enjoyed by baseball, pro football wilted as its few independently-owned organisations – mainly in the Midwest and New York state – struggled to turn a profit. On the night of 17 September, in Canton, Ohio, the same town that the game's hall of fame now calls home, representatives from the 11 pro teams from Ohio, Illinois, Indiana and New York gathered in a Jordan and Hupmobile car dealership belonging to the owner of the champion Canton Bulldogs, Ralph Hay.

Among the men was the great innovator and football pioneer George Halas, whose initials GSH to this day mark the sleeves of the Chicago Bears. In fact, of the 11 teams represented on that balmy September night, two were the predecessors of modern NFL teams; the Halas' Decatur Staleys became the Bears and the Chicago Cardinals would go on to be today's Arizona Cardinals, via a 27-year stop in St Louis.

The Green Bay Packers are acknowledged to be the oldest team still in existence never to change cities – forming in 1919 and starting league play in 1921, while the New York Giants joined the league in 1925. Among the founding members, teams from current NFL cities Detroit, Cleveland, Chicago and Buffalo were represented; though none of the teams are still in existence.

As the men huddled in the showroom, they got to setting out a basis of their new league, a league they would call the American Professional Football Association, or AFPA. The two big roadblocks were player poaching, which had spiked in recent years, and player power, which

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★ Johnny Unitas, of the Baltimore Colts, was one of the stars of pro football as it began to enjoy mainstream popularity in 1967

PRO FOOTBALL'S FIRST PIONEER

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★ **Known as 'Papa Bear' and 'Mr Everything', George Halas will always be known as pro football's first great pioneer and innovator, whose influence is seen in the NFL to this day.** One of the NFL's key co-founders in 1920, Halas was a player on the Decatur Staleys squad, as well as being their owner and coach. He then moved them to Chicago where they became the Bears. Halas was an eight-time NFL champion, winning titles in 1921, 1933, 1940, 1941, 1946 and 1963 as head coach – and in 1932 and 1943 as owner. Owning the team until his death in 1988, the club to this day wears his initials, GSH, on their sleeves in tribute.

had led to skyrocketing wages. There was also the matter of determining an end-of-season champion. The league's president would be Jim Thorpe, still the star of the Canton Bulldogs – although an aging one. He was unanimously voted in by the owners.

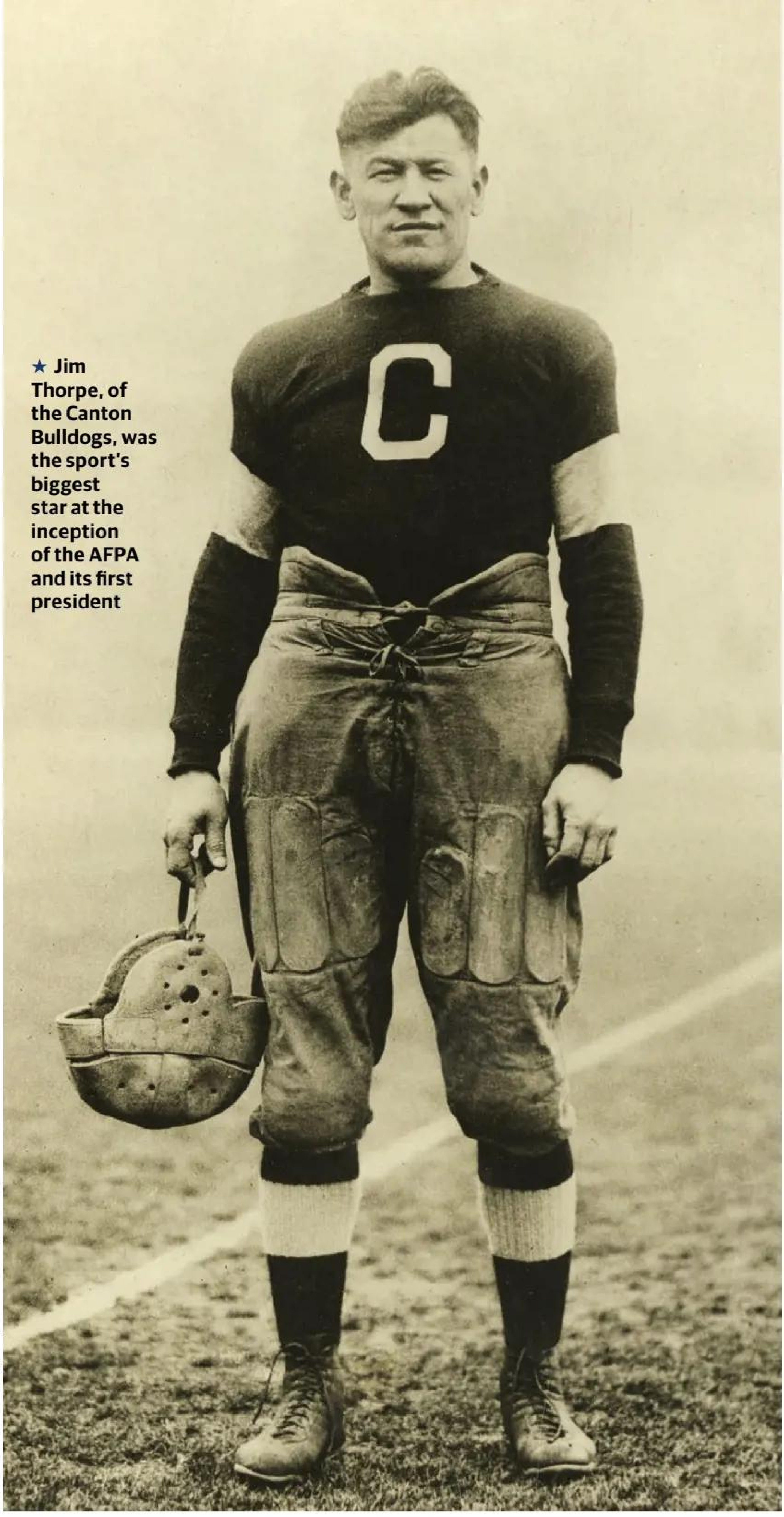
If the inception of the APFA was an historic moment in football history, it was still a world away from what we know the pro sport to be today. Official standings were not kept and teams scheduled their own contests – even against non-league and college teams. The early days were a struggle, both in terms of gate receipts and media attention, and the league was something of a disorganised mess. Three teams joined before the end of the inaugural season and one – the Muncie Flyers – withdrew before the end. With disputes over the legitimacy of such an irregular regular season, it was four months before the inaugural league winners were crowned. By ballot, the Akron Pros were champions-elect.

The nascent league continued to play second-fiddle to the college game throughout the 1920s, despite re-branding as the National Football League in 1922. But as the decade wore on national attention slowly turned towards the NFL. Rising attendances also meant all the small-market teams had moved to the big cities by 1935, apart from the Green Bay Packers, although even they took to playing some of their games in nearby Milwaukee.

Elements of the current NFL began to creep in. In 1936, the amateur draft was introduced and, in 1939, the league had televised its first game – a win for the Brooklyn Dodgers, over the high-flying Philadelphia Eagles, 23-14. But the big turning point came in the championship game of 1958, when the Baltimore Colts squeaked out a 23-17 overtime victory against the New York Giants.

Pro football's first nationally televised game, it marked the start of the NFL's surge in popularity, as families across the United States switched their gaze from college football. The dramatic finale, marked by a one-yard winning touchdown by fullback Alan Ameche, is to this day cited as one of the greatest American sporting moments, and one that helped to shift public opinion.

Besides that, the 1958 championship game was one between two behemoth franchises, featuring a slew of hall of famers, notably Colts quarterback Johnny Unitas. Although business was good – and the league uniquely reigned supreme despite remaining based in a select region of the country – trouble was brewing. Businessmen frustrated in their attempts to either buy into the NFL or buy existing franchises decided to establish a rival league, the American Football League, in 1959. The first season was played in 1960.


★ Jim Thorpe, of the Canton Bulldogs, was the sport's biggest star at the inception of the AFPA and its first president

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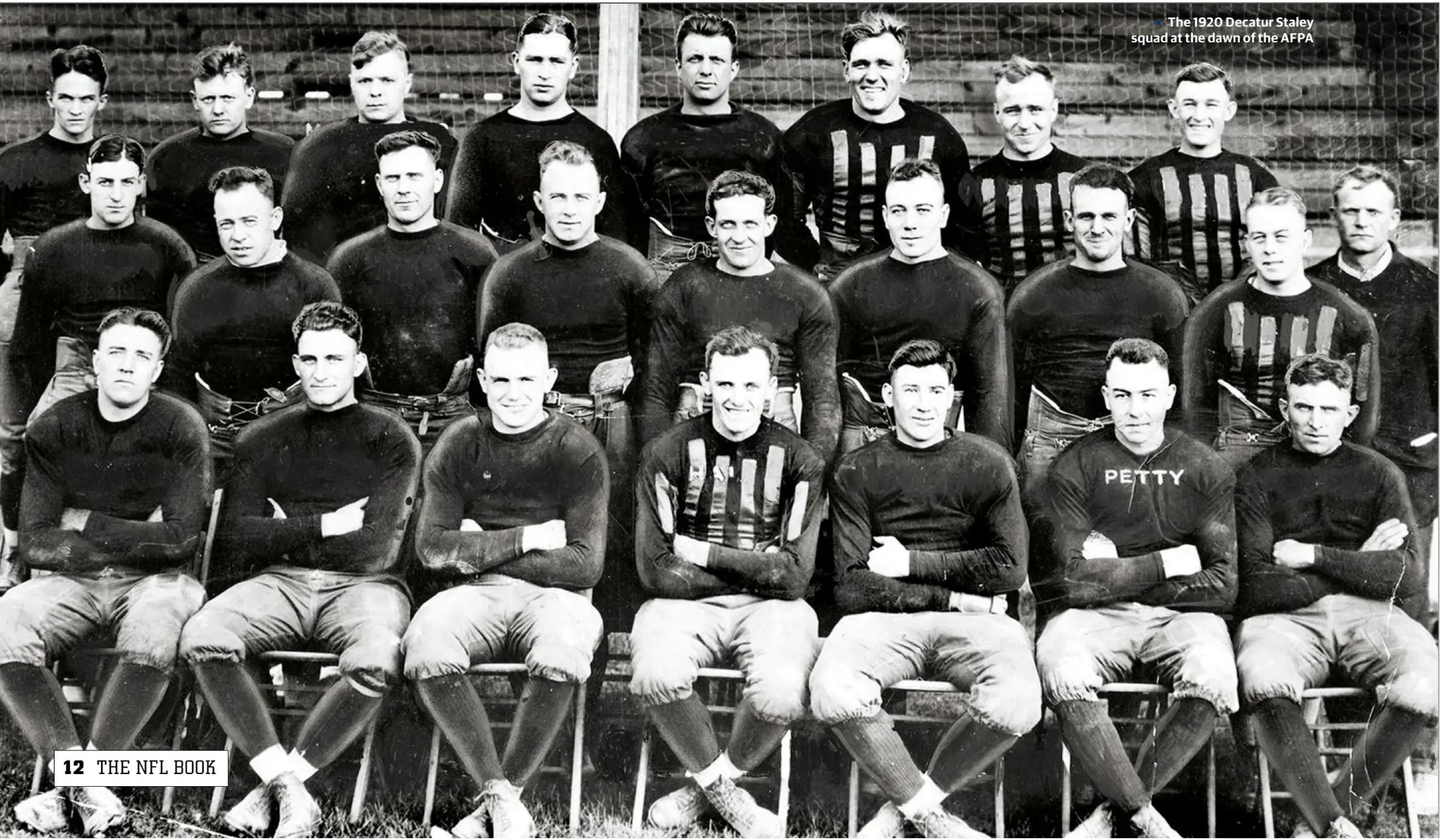


★ The 1920 Decatur Staley squad at the dawn of the AFPA

While competitors had raised their hackles before, no challenge to the NFL had seemed as formidable as the AFL. Backed by serious investors and having established its own amateur draft, the upstart league sparked a bidding war for the best players, firing a decisive shot by bagging Joe Namath out of college. Broadway Joe, as he was to be known, was a hot pick coming out of the University of Alabama but the AFL's New York Jets beat out the NFL's St Louis Cardinals for him, forking out an unprecedented $427,000.

In retaliation to the poaching of AFL stars by the NFL, AFL president Al Davis, who would preside over the Oakland/Los Angeles Raiders franchise until his death in 2011, encouraged a campaign of signing big-name NFL talent, especially quarterbacks.

Recognising the rivalry was mutually damaging, the two leagues held merger talks, announcing the deal in the summer of 1966. And thus the Super Bowl era was born, although the first AFL-NFL championship game was not known as such until the 1967 season. Bart Starr, Green Bay's superstar quarterback, led his team to the first two titles, before Namath made history in 1969, by winning the AFL's first national title after making the pre-game 'guarantee' his New York Jets would defeat the all-conquering Baltimore Colts in Super Bowl III.

While the AFL and its teams have since given over to the NFL, both using the name and branding, many AFL innovations were permanently adopted, including a game clock, names on jerseys and the widespread use of African-American athletes.

Since then, the league has gone from strength to strength. Without serious challenge over the intervening decades, the NFL has become the US's biggest league by a wide margin.

> "The NFL has become the US's biggest league by a wide margin"

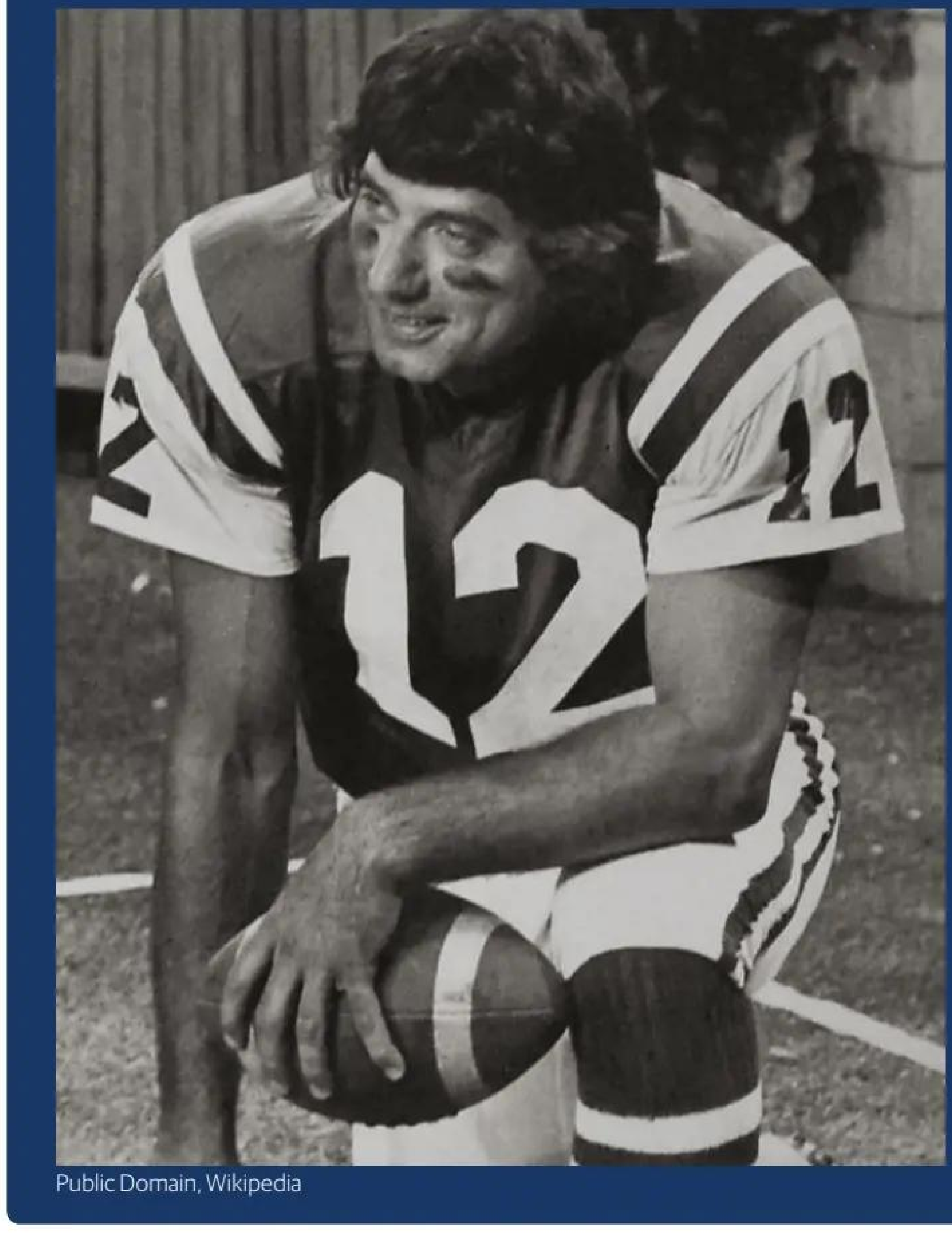
Marked by a willingness by owners to adapt the rules to make for a more television-friendly sport and innovations like 'Monday Night Football', overseas regular season games and expansion franchises, the NFL has maintained supremacy over Major League Baseball and the NBA for the best part of 50 years.

The league's popularity has rocketed to such an extent that the Super Bowl is regarded as an unofficial holiday in the US, watched by close to half of the country's population and garnering almost $5 million for each 30-second TV ad. The NFL is also increasingly seen as a global league today to rival the Premier League and La Liga of European soccer, and stars like Aaron Rodgers and Tom Brady are almost household names in countries like the UK.

After brief forays into Mexico, regular season match-ups have been held at Wembley stadium since 2007, when the inaugural game saw Eli Manning's New York Giants, who would go on to win that season's Super Bowl, triumph over the Miami Dolphins. The games have been overwhelmingly popular in the UK. Twickenham Stadium, the home of English rugby, was awarded a game for the 2016 season, while Premier League club Tottenham Hotspur began hosting games at their new state-of-the-art stadium during the 2019 season.

This has all spawned talk of a London franchise, which despite obvious logistical issues, is keenly sought by the league's commissioner, Roger Goodell. A team in another country, not least in Europe, would truly mark the NFL's ascendancy from its 1920 inception, when it was a bit-part player in the American sports scene, to a global product. One that is not just watched across the globe but actively supported in all continents – something no other US sport has ever been able to boast.

JOE NAMATH AND 'THE GUARANTEE'



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★ **After the AFL lost the first two Super Bowls, both known as AFL-NFL championship games, the finale to the 1968 season was the first title for an upstart AFL team.** Joe Namath, famously taken by the New York Jets from under the nose of the St Louis Cardinals in the draft, guaranteed victory over the Baltimore Colts before the game. It was a huge gamble for 'Broadway Joe', who was going up against the 13-1 Colts, but it paid off in front of more than 75,000 fans at the Miami Orange Bowl. The Jets' daunting defence held the Colts offence, led by quarterback Earl Morrell, scoreless until Morrell was replaced by the aging Johnny Unitas. The victory solidified the AFL's legitimacy as rivals to the NFL – as well as Namath's status as the league's biggest star.

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★ **Vince Lombardi and quarterback Bart Starr, who combined to win the first two championships after the NFL-AFL merger**

THE RULES OF FOOTBALL

Without rules there would be chaos, and yet the NFL manages to combine both with aplomb

Football is a lot like a game of chess: two teams strategically trying to pick the other apart, each looking to find and exploit weaknesses in their opponent. Although on paper some may dismiss it as nothing more than a group of human beings hurling themselves at each other, it is in fact a thinking man's sport.

Inspired by the likes of rugby and association football, it was the latter that established the initial set of rules in 1869. Fast-forward to the mid-1870s, however, and colleges still playing association football followed in the footsteps of rugby union, mainly because doing so allowed the ball to be carried. It wasn't until 1880 until the laws we're used to today started to establish themselves. Drawn up by Walter Camp – who's often referred to as the 'father of American football' – he introduced the snap of the ball, eleven-player teams, the concept of downs, the ability to pass forward, the neutral zone and the size and shape of the football itself. While these have obviously evolved throughout the years, this set of rules has always been seen as the foundation of the game.

There's little doubt that tactical prowess shapes every match, but everything in place has also been designed to create fast, exciting action. Overtime is only in place should two teams struggle to break each other down, and even then a tie is a very unlikely outcome. It's no huge surprise that gridiron is not only one of the most popular sports in the United States, but across the entire planet.

★ The football scrimmage is one of the most common things to see during any game

BASICS

Fundamentally, the objective of any football game is to outscore your opponent. Each game is contested over a period of four, 15-minute quarters, separated by a 12-minute break for half-time. There are also two-minute breaks at the end of the first and third quarters as both teams change ends. Both teams can also call up to three time-outs per half where the game is stopped. These periods are often used for a coach to reassess a team's approach or give their players a rest.

In terms of the teams themselves, they're broken down into numerous squads with one 11-man team having possession of the football and going on the offensive, and another 11 players, known as the defense, trying to stop this wave of attack. When trying to score, any and all progress is measured in yards as the offensive team tries to gain as much 'yardage' as possible. They do this by being given four downs (or chances) where they try and march forward 10-yards. If they're successful, the downs are reset and a team tries once again. If they fail, possession is turned over to the other team.

Naturally, the end goal is to put points on the scoreboard, and the best way to do this is by scoring a touchdown, the biggest single score in a football game. Achieved when a ball is carried across the opposition's goal and into the end zone, or caught in the end zone, it's worth six points and also opens up the opportunity to try and gain an extra point with a 'point after touchdown' where a team will kick the ball through the goal posts. The offense can, however, try and score an extra two points by running or throwing the ball into the end zone.

When a touchdown doesn't seem on the cards, a team can also attempt a field goal. Worth three points, they can often change the fate of a game during the closing minutes. They can be attempted from anywhere on the field but most come from inside the defense's 45-yard line. To convert a successful attempt, the ball must be kicked over the goal-post's crossbar.

Teams can also score points with a safety, which occurs when the offensive ball carrier is tackled behind his own goal line. Often the result of a team playing far too defensively, this is worth two points.

Although that seems like a lot to take in, it only ever takes a single game to understand the basics and get a good feel for what's going on. Think of football like a turn-based battle and you'll be well on your way.

THE FOOTBALL FIELD

Given that football is a battle for territory as much as it is trying to accumulate points, the field is far more important than in some other sports. Evolving drastically over the years, the fundamentals have remained the same, namely that you play on a grass surface and all markings and lines must be painted white. While many teams over the years have introduced artificial turf, which is easier to maintain, the majority of players think the quickest way to shorten their careers is by playing on one.

The field itself is rectangular and measures 120 yards (100 metres), by 53.3 yards (48.67 metres). Goal lines are marked 10 yards from each end line, hence why the competitive field of play is a total of 100 yards. There are also markings every 10 yards so a team has a rough idea of how far they have to progress to achieve a first down. Hash marks – short parallel lines that mark off 1 yard increments – also appear on the field in order to give players visual aids at all times. At each end of the field are the goalposts. The crossbar of these posts is 10 feet above the ground with the vertical uprights measuring 18 feet by six inches.

There are also rules for the ball itself while on the field of play, a problem that has reared its head in the past when people have been accused of tampering. At any level of play the ball is inflated to 12.5 pounds per square inch and weighs 14 to 15 ounces. The NFL also states that the ball must have a long axis of 11.25 inches, and long circumference of 28 to 28.5 inches, and a short circumference of 21 to 21.25 inches.

It's not essential to know all these measurements when watching a game of football but they are there for a reason. Then when controversy strikes, as it did with the 'deflategate' scandal in 2015, you'll hopefully have some idea of just what all the fuss is about.

> "Many teams have introduced artificial turf… [though] the majority of players think it's the quickest way to shorten their careers"

While all football fields may be the same, each stadium provides a unique atmosphere

★ A well-balanced offense, defense and special teams is imperative for any victory

POSITIONS

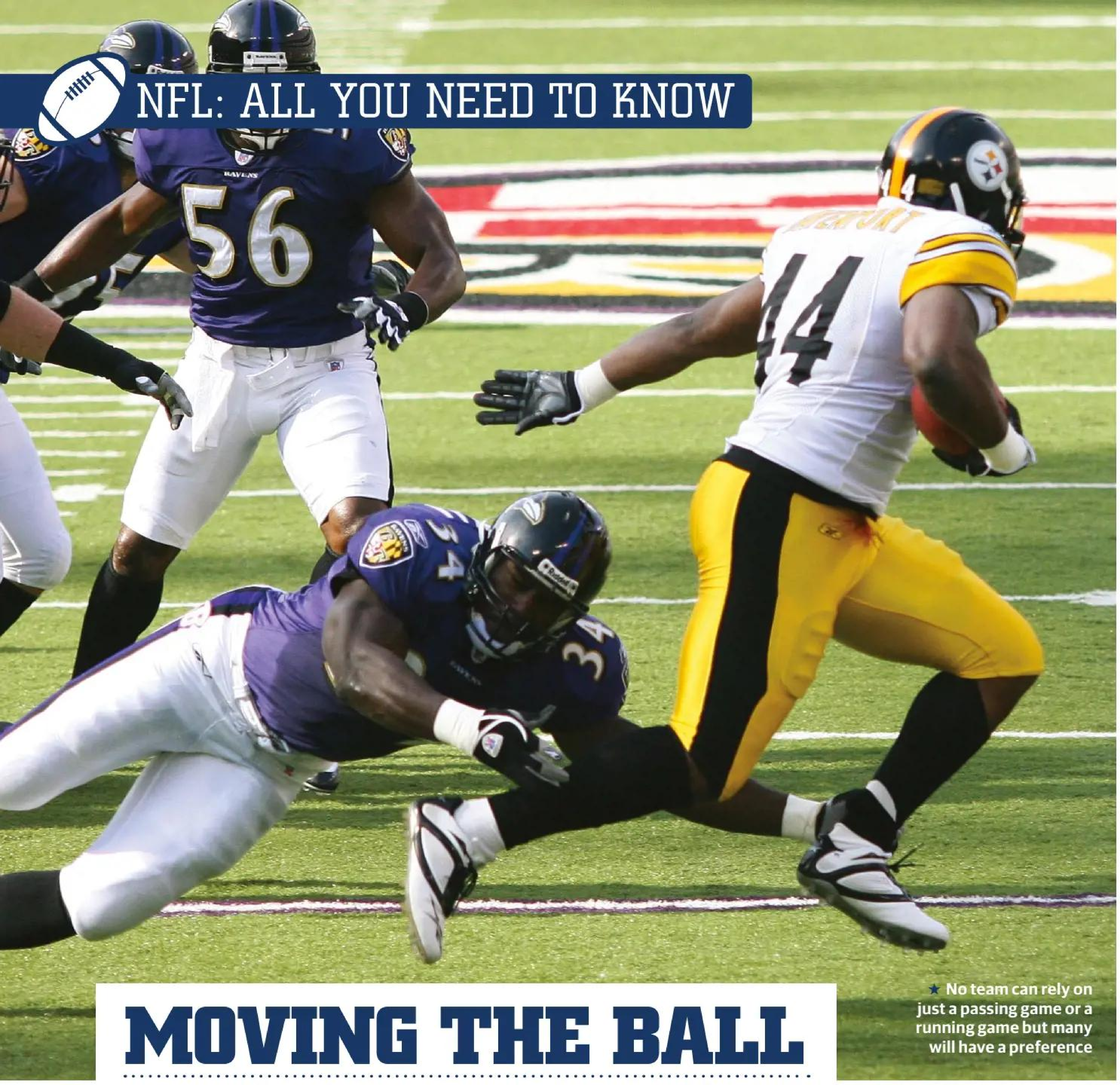
Every single role in a football team is an important one. There's so many different facets to the game that any weaknesses can prove to be catastrophic. Sure, there are only 11 players from each side on the field at any one time, but the squads themselves can be made up of up to 48 active players on game day. That's not small.

Where an offensive line-up is concerned, the quarterback is the key figurehead. In charge of dishing out plays and both passing and handing off the ball, almost everything is going to go through him. Without a strong circle around him, though, the QB will be exposed, hence why he needs to be surrounded by a decent group of tackles and guards among others. An offensive line-up also consists of running backs and wide receivers whose main goal is to gain yards.

Defensively the dynamic shifts significantly. Tasked with the single goal of gaining possession back for their team, defensive play is a matter of tackling, sacking or trying to cause the opposition to fumble the football. Ultimately, however, it's up to the linebackers, defensive ends et al to open up a route to the quarterback in order to stop him making any sort of play. The perfect conclusion to any defensive route is to push the offensive team back, denying them a first down resulting in them finishing with negative yardage.

Which brings us to special teams. While the role they play is minor in terms of the time they spend on the field, it's a vital area that more often than not can be used to win a football game in the dying moments. Used mostly during kick-offs, field goals and when a team needs to punt the ball downfield during a fourth down, special teams are also there to try and block an opposition's kicks and punts, too.

When you're in the dying seconds of a Super Bowl, and know you have a reliable kicker waiting to attempt a field goal, there is quite literally no one more important in a football side. If your kicker can score, you can win.



★ No team can rely on just a passing game or a running game but many will have a preference

MOVING THE BALL

There are two main ways to advance the ball for a side on the attack. The first, and most direct, is called 'the run'. Taking place when a quarterback hands the ball off to a running back, it's then his job to gain as many yards as possible without being brought to ground. The quarterback is also allowed to run with the ball should the situation call for it.

While most run plays require a player to do just that – run – they can be performed in many different ways. One of the most basic is 'up the middle' where a running back will aim towards a hole made for him by his offensive linemen, passing through it into extra space. A much more common attempt is the 'off tackle' run. Instead of aiming for the hole created by his teammates, the RB will look to the spot just outside the tackle in order to have more open field to play around in. All teams have multiple runs that can be executed depending on the defense they find themselves up against.

As you may of guessed, the alternative to 'the run' is 'the pass', which occurs when the football is thrown forward. More often than not, the quarterback is responsible for passing, but there are occasions when another player is used to hurl the ball to try and cause confusion among the defense. As long as the ball is thrown from behind the line of scrimmage, anyone is eligible to throw a pass. Most plays will ask for the ball to be caught by a wide receiver or the tight end. If the ball hits the ground before being caught, however, it's deemed incomplete and the offensive side must try again on their next down. If you want to know what the most exciting pass play is, look no further than the 'Hail Mary', where a quarterback will hurl the football upfield and hope it finds the right man.

TURNOVERS

★ **Everyone make mistakes, but one of the worst that any offensive side can suffer is the turnover.** Taking place when the offense accidentally turns the ball over to the defense, the most common occurrences are fumbles and interceptions. The former happens when a ball carrier or passer drops the ball. At this point, any player on the field can recover the lost ball by diving on it, or grabbing it. Whoever recovers the football is now in possession. Interceptions can happen much more suddenly, when a pass meant for an offensive player is caught by someone on defense. Should the defensive player stay on his feet, he's more than within his rights to try and run the ball into the opposition end zone and score a touchdown for his team. Sometimes the best offense really is a good defense.

PENALTIES

One of the biggest learning curves when it comes to the NFL is what is considered a penalty. Signalled when a yellow flag is thrown onto the field by an official, a team can be punished by losing yardage, losing a down altogether, or having their opposition awarded an automatic first down. On top of that, there are dozens of penalties, all enforced to try and keep the game as safe and as balanced as possible.

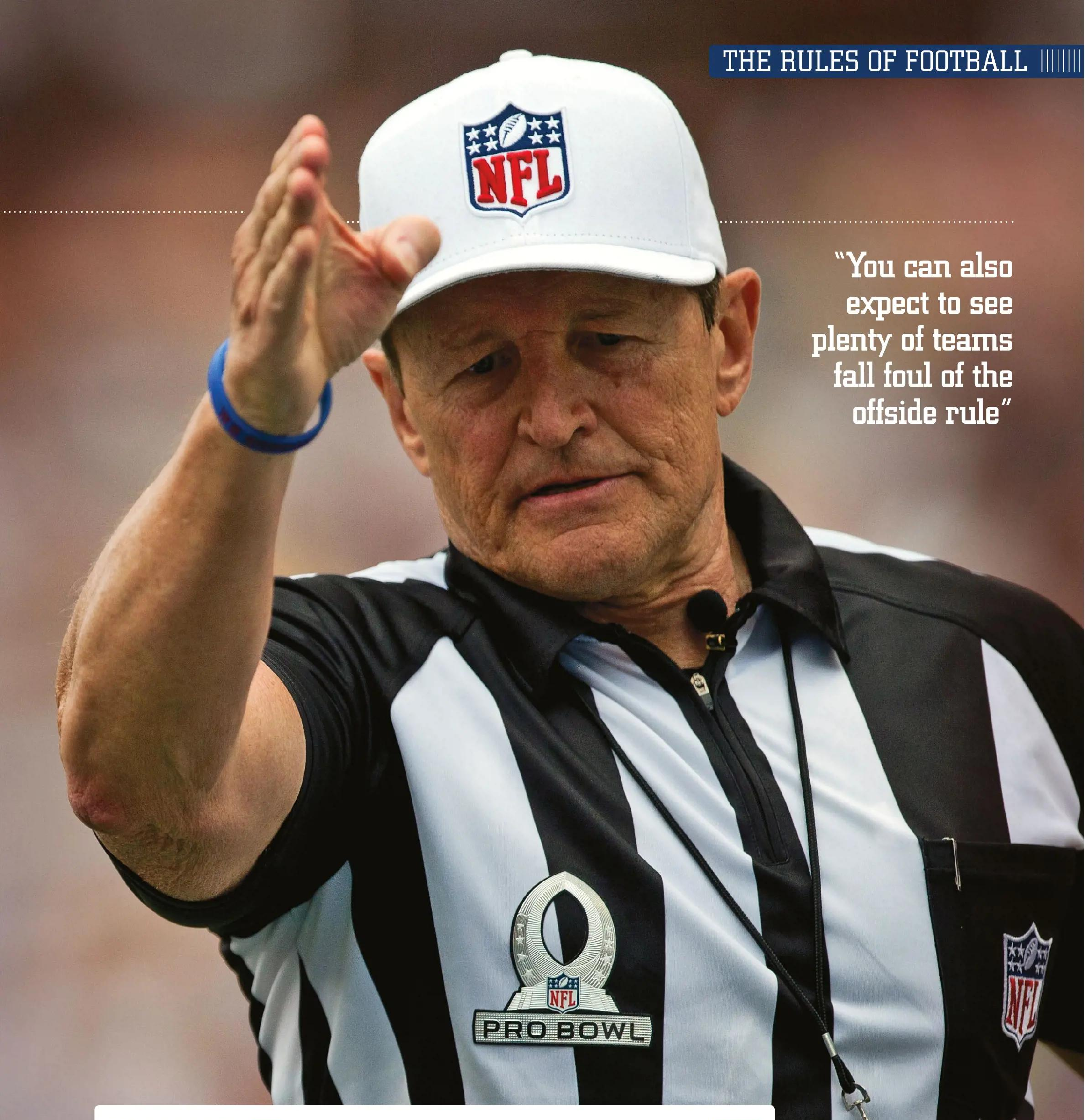
One of the most well known is the 'chop block' where an offensive player hits a defensive player who is already being blocked in the knee, and vice versa. Clipping – when a blocker makes contact with a non-ball carrying opponent from behind or below the waist – is also common in most games in the NFL, as is encroachment. This occurs when, before the snap, a defensive player fails to hold his ground. Should he illegally cross the line of scrimmage and make contact with an opponent before the snap, then his team will be punished.

There are also a range of more self-explanatory penalties such as delaying the game, equipment violations, face masking – where a player literally grabs another by his face mask – false starts, helmet-to-helmet collisions and holding. Referees will also keep an eye out for illegal manoeuvres that don't follow the rules and regulations put in place. Passes, kicks, formations, contact and kick-offs all have specific guidelines and any breaking of these can cost a team precious yards.

You can also expect to see plenty of teams fall foul of the offside rule during a game, which relates to players being on the wrong side of the line of scrimmage when the ball is snapped. While some movement is allowed prior to the snap, every player must be in place before the center makes his move.

Like most things in football, all it takes is time and experience to start to understand the ins and outs of the game's rules. Before long you'll be calling penalties as if you're John Madden.

★ Each professional football game makes use of seven officials



"You can also expect to see plenty of teams fall foul of the offside rule"

THE PERSON IN BLACK AND WHITE

An official is the person responsible for enforcing the rules during any and all games in the NFL. Usually seven people are used to cover the length of the field, each equipped with a whistle, a penalty marker, a bean bag, a down indicator, a game data card, and a stopwatch. In order to keep some semblance of control, the officials are broken down into categories, namely the referee, umpire, head linesman, line judge, back judge, side judge and center judge. Each of these has a specific task that has been designed so no area of the field of play goes unwatched or unobserved.

HOW THE NFL WORKS

From its inception in the 1920s to the global phenomenon it is today, the NFL has become one of the most powerful sports organisations on the planet

Today, the National Football League is a sight to behold. A many-headed sporting beast with 32 franchised teams spread across the United States, over 1,600 active players at any one time and a divisional setup that culminates in one of the biggest sports spectacles in the world: the Super Bowl.

The league has come a long way, too – from humble beginnings in the 1920s to the grand unification in 1960, the sport of gridiron has also grown, adapted and revolutionised itself over those 100 years. Every corner of the sport has been overhauled or tweaked as fans, officials and teams edge it forward towards its perfect self – ball sizes, equipment types, rule infringements, stadium sizes – everything has been reborn at one point or another.

It's not just a sport contained to the United States either. The success of the NFL through the last century has not only helped seed gridiron as an intrinsic part of high school and college culture (where whole towns will shut down to watch their high school team take to the field), but seen it proliferated on a global scale. Leagues can now be found across the world, from Germany to Australia, and football as a sport grows ever more popular in the United Kingdom as professional and collegiate teams continue to increase in popularity. Not to mention the regular season matches that the National Football League holds in London every year.

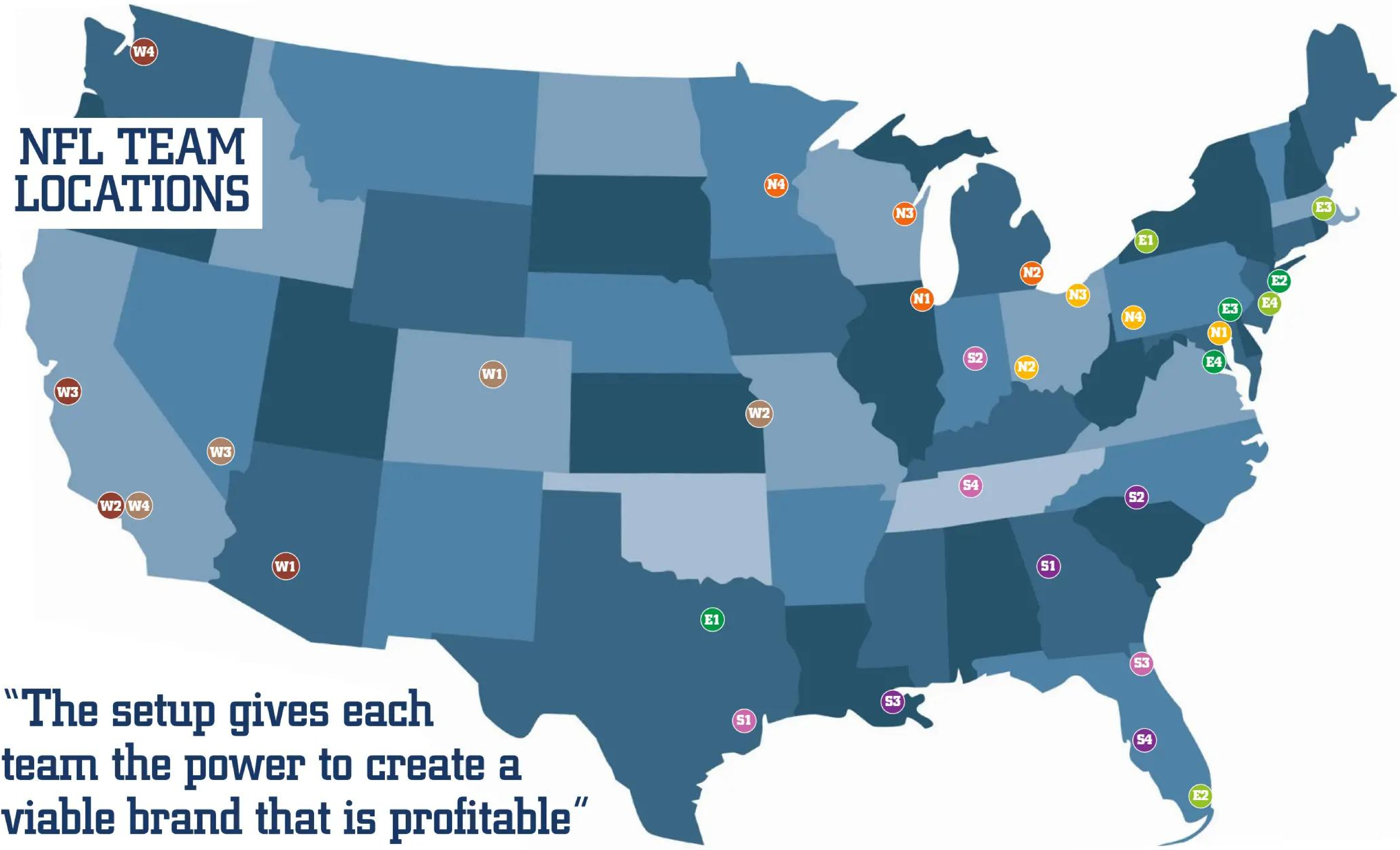
None of this would have been possible without the success of the NFL, and the undeniable electricity of watching two teams juke, pass, block and tackle their way into the annals of sporting greatness. Are you ready for some football?

THE TEAMS OF THE NFL

At its core, the NFL is a trade organisation financed by the 32 teams that populate it. So while each franchise has its own corporate structure and autonomy, it pays a proportion of its earnings to the league in order to fund the regulation and organisation of the whole. Those 32 teams are divided into two separate conferences, the AFC (American Football Conference) and the NFC (National Football Conference).

As part of the NFL, each team is 'franchised' – meaning it has the right to operate as a business in its designated home city and can do so up to 75 miles around said central location (if two teams are near to one another, a franchise can operate business across half that distance). Being a franchise means that team has the exclusive rights to host professional games of football, as well as promotional and advertising rights.

There are exceptions to the rule, such as the New York Giants and the New York Jets operating within the same area and having to share such promotional rights within certain terms, but overall the setup gives each team the power to create a viable brand that is profitable for them, the league and the city itself. As a rule, each team is allowed 53 players to be signed to their roster, but only 46 can be considered 'active' and available on each given game day. Unlike almost any other sport, each NFL team is divided into three segments – offense, defense and special teams (for kick offs, kick off receptions and field goals) – and is managed by a huge team of offensive, defensive, specialist and fitness coaches who operate under a single head coach. It's the head coach that has the final say in terms of player selection and game day tactics.



NFL TEAM LOCATIONS

© Getty Images

> "The setup gives each team the power to create a viable brand that is profitable"

AMERICAN FOOTBALL CONFERENCE

EAST	NORTH	SOUTH	WEST
E1 Buffalo Bills	**N1** Baltimore Ravens	**S1** Houston Texans	**W1** Denver Broncos
E2 Miami Dolphins	**N2** Cincinnati Bengals	**S2** Indianapolis Colts	**W2** Kansas City Chiefs
E3 New England Patriots	**N3** Cleveland Browns	**S3** Jacksonville Jaguars	**W3** Las Vegas Raiders
E4 New York Jets	**N4** Pittsburgh Steelers	**S4** Tennessee Titans	**W4** Los Angeles Chargers

NATIONAL FOOTBALL CONFERENCE

EAST	NORTH	SOUTH	WEST
E1 Dallas Cowboys	**N1** Chicago Bears	**S1** Atlanta Falcons	**W1** Arizona Cardinals
E2 New York Giants	**N2** Detroit Lions	**S2** Carolina Panthers	**W2** Los Angeles Rams
E3 Philadelphia Eagles	**N3** Green Bay Packers	**S3** New Orleans Saints	**W3** San Francisco 49ers
E4 Washington Commanders	**N4** Minnesota Vikings	**S4** Tampa Bay Buccaneers	**W4** Seattle Seahawks

REGULAR SEASON

Since those early days of the APFA in the 1920s to the modern day NFL, the league has gone through many a divisional restructuring as more expansion teams have joined and the breadth of the sport grown. Today, the NFL is divided into two separate conferences, the AFC (American Football Conference) and the NFC (National Football Conference). Each conference contains four separate divisions, each one defined by geography: the AFC West, East, South and North and the NFC West, East, South and North.

Each year, NFL executives come together to schedule the NFL regular season – an arduous task that sees the league having to factor in every other major event taking place across the US for the duration of the season. Being able to build a schedule that gives each team the opportunity to play each of their required games takes an incredible amount of planning to pull off. Once the schedule is in place, each of the 32 franchises will play 17 games over the 18-week regular season with a 'bye week' (week off) factored in as well.

To break it down even further, each team will play six games against the other three teams in their division. This means they play each opponent twice per season – once at home and again on the road. On top of this, each franchise will play one game against each of the teams in another division within their conference. The division selected changes each year to ensure each franchise plays every other in its conference every three years.

On top of this, each franchise will play one game against each of the teams in a division from the other conference, with two played at home and two played away. Like the rotational system used in each franchise's domestic conference, the NFL ensures that each team plays each of the other conference's divisions once every four years.

The final three games of a team's regular season are played against sides who finished in the same position in their respective divisions. Two of these teams come from the remaining divisions in their own conference, while the third comes from the other conference. For example, a team that finished third in its division in the previous season will play three other third-placed teams that they aren't already matched up against.

THE EXPANSION TEAMS

When the American Professional Football Association (the APFA was the first precursor to the NFL) officially formed in 1920 it consisted of 14 different teams. Today, only two of those teams are still in operation (albeit under slightly different names): the Chicago (now Arizona) Cardinals and the Decatur Staleys (now the Chicago Bears). Every other team in the league today is an expansion team that joined the league as it grew and transformed.

The Green Bay Packers were the first new blood to join the fledgling NFL in 1921 (making it the oldest franchise to hold the same name in the league's history), and they were soon joined by a raft of new teams as more cities applied for a franchise. The Dallas Cowboys became the first expansion team to join the unified AFL and NFL in 1960, with the Houston Texans being the most recent in 2002.

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★ The Super Bowls have all been numbered in Roman numerals, except for Super Bowl 50 which dropped the tradition to mark the landmark event

PLAYOFFS

After the gruelling 18-week regular season, the National Football League enters the classic sophomore stage of American sports: the playoffs. Sometimes known as the NFL postseason, the playoffs consist of 14 teams (up from 12 since 2020) – seven each from the AFC and NFC. The teams consist of the champions from each division (seeded one to four depending on their record that season), plus three 'Wild Card' entries, which are selected from the remaining teams with the best regular season stats (these teams are seeded five to seven).

These results also determine who the Wild Cards will play – the team seeded seventh will play the champion team seeded second, while the sixth-seeded Wild Card team will play seed three of the divisional winners, and so on. These games also give name to the first round of the playoffs, known as the Wild Card round or the Wild Card weekend. Since this is a Wild Card-focused round, the first seeded divisional champions in each conference get a bye, granting them automatic qualification into the second round of the playoffs. This system helps ensure that teams still have something to play for in the regular season, even if they've already wrapped up their division title.

The next round, known as the divisional playoffs round, sees the next stage of the tournament-style setup play out. Now the first seed team will play the worst performing team from the previous round, while the two remaining teams will play each other, with the higher seed granted home advantage. As this is a playoffs setup, the two surviving knockout winners of these games will meet in the finals of their conference, known as the AFC and NFC Conference Championship.

Once a team is crowned the winner of their particular conference (adding a much sought-after Conference Championship to the records of their franchise), the AFC and NFC champions will meet in the NFL final – the Super Bowl. Easily one of the most watched sporting events in the world, the Super Bowl is usually held in late January or early February and culminates a season that began in the height of summer.

★ The long road to the NFL Championship ends at the Super Bowl

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REGULATIONS

As you'd expect, the NFL has plenty of rules and regulations to keep players, teams and staff in line and to ensure every action and reaction is fair and above board. Most of these have little impact on the action playing out on the field, but there are still a great deal of NFL-wide rules that keep some of the most interesting and provocative elements of the sport in check.

For instance, the base salary for an NFL team has a cap that began at $120 million in 1994 and progressively increased over the years as the cost of running a franchise and the status of players grew with the sport. For 2025, the salary cap per franchise has been increased to $279.2 million, and should a team exceed that amount the NFL will fine them. Penalties of up to $5 million can be incurred for breaching the cap, so franchises are often very careful to avoid tempting the wrath of the NFL's internal policing body.

Substance abuse is taken very seriously in the NFL and encompasses one of the strictest areas of its regulations. The rules for drug use in the NFL are broken down into two separate policies: the National Football League Policy on Anabolic Steroids and Related Substances, and the National Football League Policy and Program for Substances of Abuse. Consisting of 60 pages of specific regulations, the former focuses on the use of certain 'performance enhancing' drugs such as steroids, while the latter concerns itself with the use of banned or illegal substances (alcohol, marijuana, and so on). For instance, the use of HGH (Human Growth Hormone, the common term for steroids) in a first violation will see a player banned for six games without pay.

There are also strict guidelines in place for franchise tags, resulting in one of the most provocative and hotly contested rules in the NFL. A franchise tag is a binding legal status placed on a player about to become an unrestricted free agent (that is, they can sign and play for anyone). Each team only has one franchise tag per year and it's there to keep a player from moving to another big team for one whole year if certain conditions are met.

> "Substance abuse is taken very seriously in the NFL and encompasses one of the strictest areas of its regulations"

Introduced in 1993 to protect teams against the introduction of free agency, many critics now call the franchise tag an archaic rule that has no place in the modern era

Creative Commons; Wikipedia; Jennifer A. Villalovos

★ The commissioner has the power to level fines against players or staff who have infringed on the rules, with a maximum figure of $500,000 at his disposal

Public Domain, Wikipedia - SSG Teddy Wade

HIERARCHY

As you might imagine, a sporting organisation as big as the National Football League doesn't operate without a small army's worth of officials regulating and monitoring everything from funding budgets to the length of each blade of grass on the field. It's a huge task and it requires a tight management structure that starts with the NFL commissioner Roger Goodell and travels all the way down to the referees who officiate every regular season and playoff game.

The management of the league is divided between executive offices: the commissioner, secretary, and treasurer. The commissioner acts as the face of the league and also makes executive decisions in major situations regarding the league (such as the introduction of new policies or chairing investigations into scandals such as spygate or deflategate). The secretary and treasurer are appointed by the commissioner and oversee the day-to-day management of the league and the funding required to keep it running.

The running of each conference is also structured, with a president appointed for each. These offices overlook the running of the league, including helping to organise the schedule for the conference and liaising with each franchise to ensure the team has a direct means of contacting NFL management. Despite all these smaller positions, ultimately the real power lies back with the commissioner. He'll be the one who deals with contracts, disputes and more, dealing out fines and helping manage the smallest facets of the organisation.

For many years, the NFL had operated under a tax exempt status but it eventually gave this up in 2015 following a great deal of public criticism. Goodell called it a "distraction," saying, "The effects of the tax exempt status of the league office have been mischaracterised repeatedly in recent years… Every dollar of income generated through television rights fees, licensing agreements, sponsorships, ticket sales, and other means is earned by the 32 clubs and is taxable there."

PROFILE

ROGER GOODELL

Public Domain, Wikipedia - SSG Teddy Wade

★ As commissioner of the NFL, Roger Stokoe Goodell holds the highest position of executive office in the organisation. The son of United States Senator Charles Ellsworth Goodell, the younger Goodell began his career in the NFL as an administrative intern in 1982. From there he climbed the ranks of the league and eventually earned the position of executive vice president and chief operating officer in December 2001.

Goodell spent five years in the role before being named as the new NFL commissioner on 1 September 2006, succeeding the long-standing Paul Tagliabue in the role. Often referred to as 'the most powerful man in sports', Goodell has made a number of changes to the league including the disbandment of NFL Europe and the introduction of the NFL Personal Conduct Policy.

Coverage of the draft is thick and fast with a tremendous amount of analysis for each and every pick

THE NFL DRAFT

The NFL season doesn't start when the first ball is kicked: it begins with the draft

The National Football League draft exists to inject new life into football before a new season begins. While on paper, to someone unfamiliar with its inner workings, it seems like an overly complicated puzzle, it is in fact a fantastic system to ensure that you never know quite what to expect from a team. A single draft pick has the potential to boost an entire roster, meaning that everyone involved competes from the very first round to the very last.

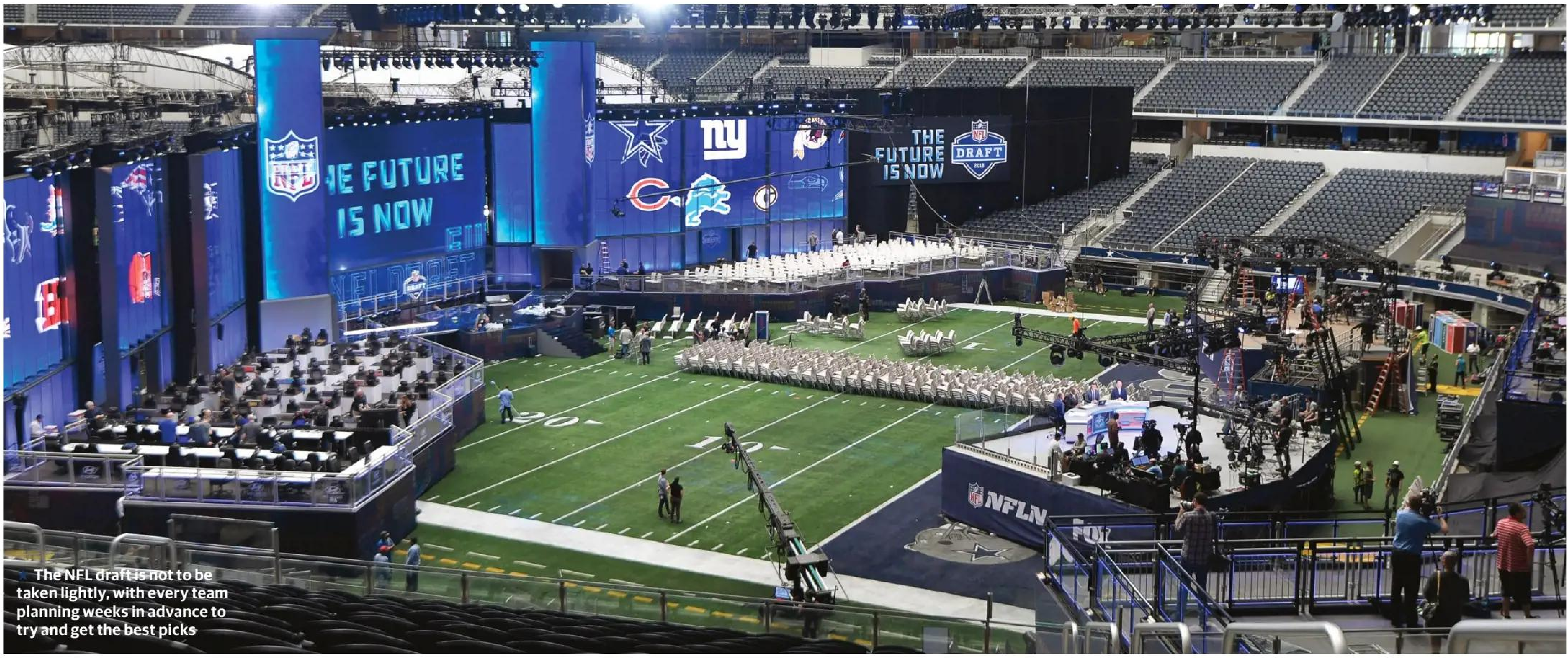
Evolving with each passing year, the key has always been to try and maintain a fair draft. Unlike other sports where the most successful teams can usually swallow up the best talent, the NFL's aim is to always keep both fans and players guessing. A struggling side from the previous season can have their fortunes completely turned around by being savvy during the draft. In many ways, it's as tactical as a game of football itself.

It all starts off with the 32 teams receiving one pick in each of the arranged seven rounds. This hasn't always been the case, of course. The game adapts depending on how many teams are involved with the draft, and in the past it wasn't unheard of to have as many as 30 rounds. Even the most hardened of fans would be pushed to keep up with all of that.

The most decisive issue in any draft is who gets the first pick. Given to the team with the worst record in the previous season, it instantly reduces fears that the side in question could have another poor year – they have a choice of some of the best up-and-coming players out there. Ending with the Super Bowl champions, there's also the opportunity to trade picks with other clubs before each round, should a deal be struck.

From there, a pecking order of sorts is introduced to once again establish a fair base. Those who didn't qualify for the playoffs are assigned the next 19 spots. So if you had the second worst overall record the year before, you

> "A struggling side from the previous season can have their fortunes completely turned around by being savvy during the draft. In many ways, it's as tactical as a game"



The NFL draft is not to be taken lightly, with every team planning weeks in advance to try and get the best picks

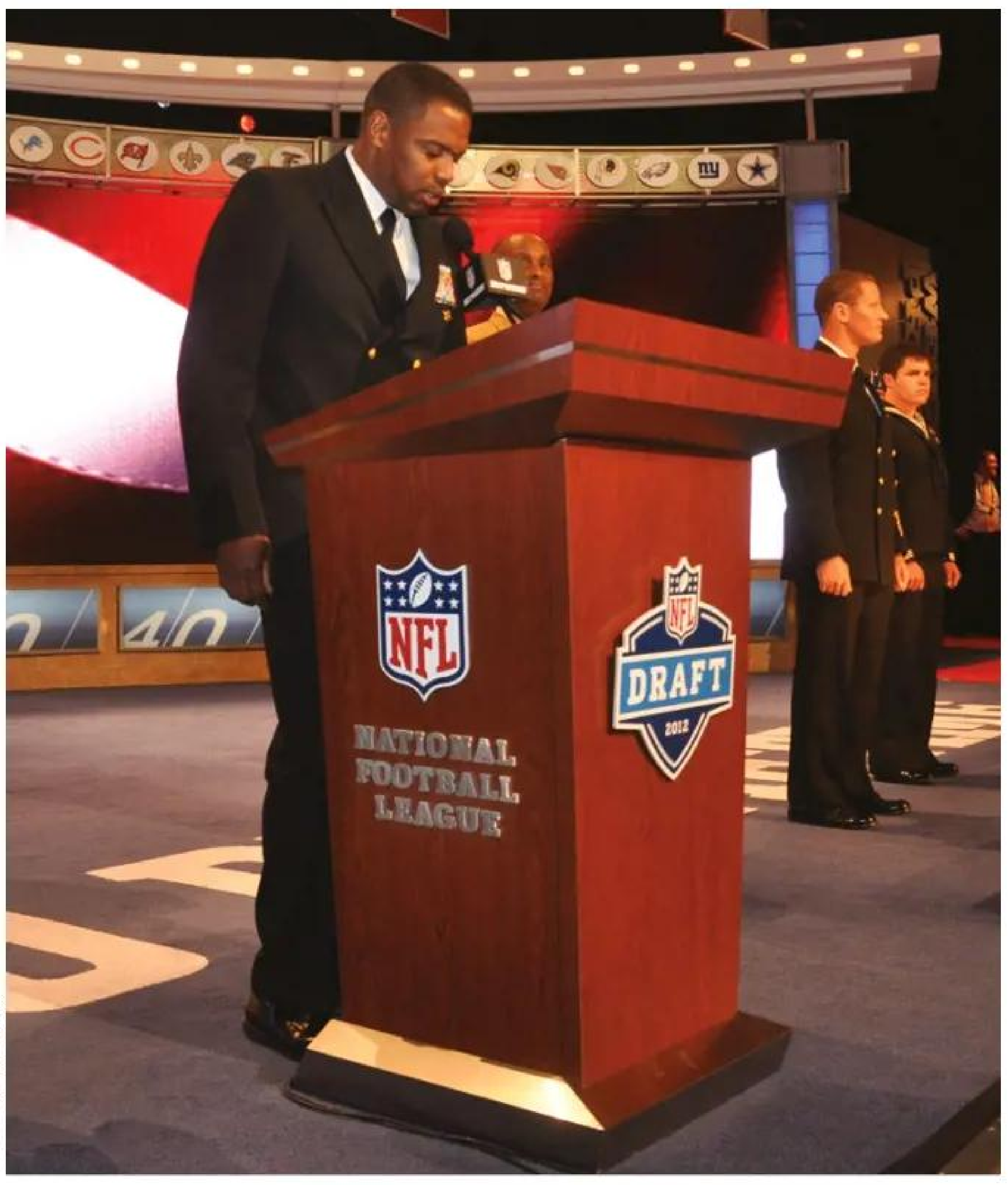
© Getty Images

The draft is one of the most anticipated events in the NFL calendar

get to pick second. Playoff teams are then given slots 21-32 based on how they all performed in the postseason. Being knocked out during a Wild Card game will earn you a higher place than those who made it to the conference championships. Should two teams have identical stats, other factors come into play such as the aggregate winning percentage of a team's opponents. If worst truly does come to worst, a good old-fashioned coin flip is there to save the day.

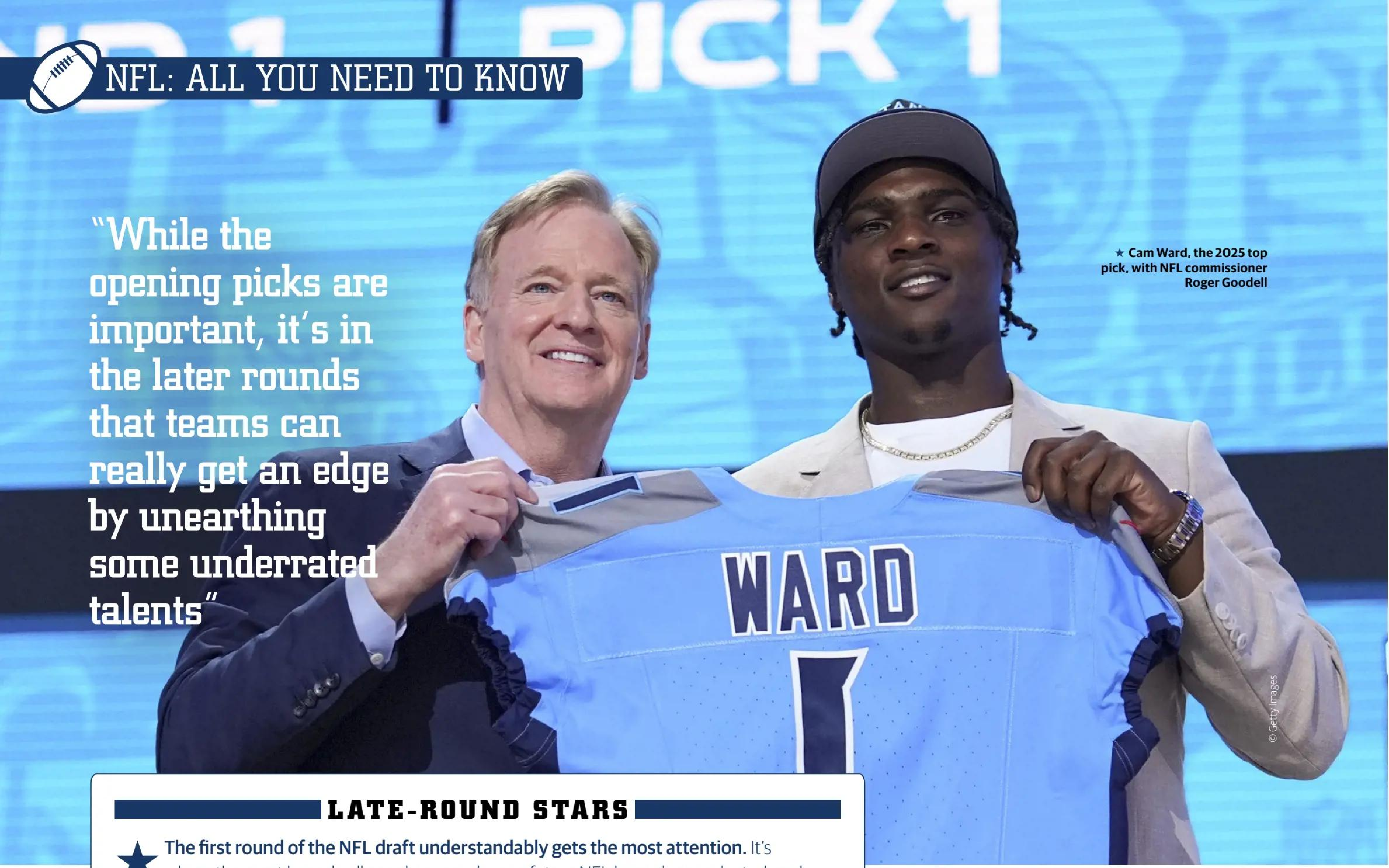
The draft takes place over three days, starting on a Thursday and going through to the Saturday. You'd be within your rights to assume there'd be some leeway with proceedings, but it is in fact a timed affair. Teams are given ten minutes to make their pick in the first round, followed by seven minutes in the second and only five minutes in the third through to the sixth. It's then cut to four for the final go-around. No team is forced to choose during this time, but going over your allocated period does run the risk of someone else taking a player you were interested

COMPENSATORY PICKS



© Getty Images

★ A compensatory free agent pick is an agreement put in place by the NFL to allow clubs that have lost free agents to another team to use the draft to replace them. Awarded through rounds three to seven, the NFL Management Council has also come up with a proprietary formula that considers a player's salary, playing time and postseason honours when determining if a player is eligible to be picked in this fashion. The values of these individuals are then totalled, with the outcome ultimately deciding which player a team can go for. These type of picks can't be traded, and this is where the draft becomes confusing. Thankfully, after sitting through multiple drafts everything will start to make sense.


★ Cam Ward, the 2025 top pick, with NFL commissioner Roger Goodell

© Getty Images

"While the opening picks are important, it's in the later rounds that teams can really get an edge by unearthing some underrated talents"

in. Much like the sport itself, you've got to have a regimented plan of attack.

The real curve ball to any draft is when trades come into play. You don't have to choose first just because you're first, and it's a perfectly viable move to trade your pick with another team. This can even see players switching teams should that be the deal that's made, meaning you never truly know what will happen over the 72 hours.

The 2025 draft, held in Green Bay, was one of the more controversial editions in recent memory. Not because of any unexpected picks or dramatic trades, but because of a notable snub for Colorado QB Shedeur Sanders – son of NFL legend Deion. Widely predicted to be taken early, Sanders fell all the way to the fifth round before being selected by the Cleveland Browns, who themselves had already taken Oregon's Dillon Gabriel in the third. Sanders' late selection brought criticism from sources including President Donald Trump, but with quarterback-needy teams opting to look elsewhere, the high-profile prospect had to settle for a training camp showdown in Cleveland before trying to establish himself in the league.

Almost as popular as the season itself, the NFL draft is a much-anticipated event each and every year, which can often provide the same drama you'd expect from a game of football. And to think – that's before we even get into the fantasy side of things…

LATE-ROUND STARS

★ **The first round of the NFL draft understandably gets the most attention.** It's where the most hyped college players and many future NFL legends are selected, and it's also accompanied by a huge amount of pomp and ceremony. But while the opening picks are important, it's in the later rounds that teams can really get an edge by unearthing some underrated talents. In 2016 the Dallas Cowboys took quarterback Dak Prescott in the fourth round with the 135th overall pick – he would go on to be named NFL Offensive Rookie of the Year and take the place of veteran starter Tony Romo. San Francisco QB Brock Purdy was taken with the very last pick of the 2022 draft but went on to become the team's starter and lead them to a Super Bowl the next year. And in the 2000 NFL draft, 198 players were taken before the New England Patriots took a gamble on a young quarterback named Tom Brady.

© Getty Images

2025 FIRST ROUND RECAP

01	CAM WARD	**QB**	MIAMI	**TENNESSEE TITANS**
02	TRAVIS HUNTER	**CB/WR**	COLORADO	**JACKSONVILLE JAGUARS**
03	ABDUL CARTER	**DE**	PENN STATE	**NEW YORK GIANTS**
04	WILL CAMPBELL	**OT**	LSU	**NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS**
05	MASON GRAHAM	**DT**	MICHIGAN	**CLEVELAND BROWNS**
06	ASHTON JEANTY	**RB**	BOISE STATE	**LAS VEGAS RAIDERS**
07	ARMAND MEMBOU	**OT**	MISSOURI	**NEW YORK JETS**
08	TETAIROA MCMILLAN	**WR**	ARIZONA	**CAROLINA PANTHERS**
09	KELVIN BANKS JR	**OT**	TEXAS	**NEW ORLEANS SAINTS**
10	COLSTON LOVELAND	**TE**	MICHIGAN	**CHICAGO BEARS**
11	MYKEL WILLIAMS	**DE**	GEORGIA	**SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS**
12	TYLER BOOKER	**G**	ALABAMA	**DALLAS COWBOYS**
13	KENNETH GRANT	**DT**	MICHIGAN	**MIAMI DOLPHINS**
14	TYLER WARREN	**TE**	PENN STATE	**INDIANAPOLIS COLTS**
15	JALON WALKER	**LB**	GEORGIA	**ATLANTA FALCONS**
16	WALTER NOLEN	**DT**	OLE MISS	**ARIZONA CARDINALS**
17	SHEMAR STEWART	**DE**	TEXAS A&M	**CINCINNATI BENGALS**
18	GREY ZABEL	**G**	NORTH DAKOTA STATE	**SEATTLE SEAHAWKS**
19	EMEKA EGBUKA	**WR**	OHIO STATE	**TAMPA BAY BUCCANEERS**
20	JAHDAE BARRON	**CB**	TEXAS	**DENVER BRONCOS**
21	DERRICK HARMON	**DT**	OREGON	**PITTSBURGH STEELERS**
22	OMARION HAMPTON	**RB**	NORTH CAROLINA	**LOS ANGELES CHARGERS**
23	MATTHEW GOLDEN	**WR**	TEXAS	**GREEN BAY PACKERS**
24	DONOVAN JACKSON	**G**	OHIO STATE	**MINNESOTA VIKINGS**
25	JAXSON DART	**QB**	OLE MISS	**NEW YORK GIANTS**
26	JAMES PEARCE JR	**DE**	TENNESSEE	**ATLANTA FALCONS**
27	MALAKI STARKS	**S**	GEORGIA	**BALTIMORE RAVENS**
28	TYLEIK WILLIAMS	**DT**	OHIO STATE	**DETROIT LIONS**
29	JOSH CONERLY JR	**OT**	OREGON	**WASHINGTON COMMANDERS**
30	MAXWELL HAIRSTON	**CB**	KENTUCKY	**BUFFALO BILLS**
31	JIHAAD CAMPBELL	**LB**	ALABAMA	**PHILADELPHIA EAGLES**
32	JOSH SIMMONS	**OT**	OHIO STATE	**KANSAS CITY CHIEFS**

© Getty Images

PROFILE

TRAVIS HUNTER

★ **Travis Hunter is a unicorn.** The 2024 Heisman Trophy winner is poised to become the first true two-way player in decades after setting records as both cornerback and wide receiver during his time at Colorado. Not since the heyday of Deion Sanders has there been a player who could potentially be a game-changer on both sides of the ball. The Jaguars traded up to grab Hunter second overall and while it remains to be seen if his unique skill set can cope with the physical demands of the NFL, it will be fascinating to watch.

© Getty Images

PROFILE

CAM WARD

★ **While much was made of who wasn't selected in the first round of the 2025 draft, Ward was a more than worthy first overall pick.** After two years at Washington State, the young QB took a massive leap forward in his final season with Miami, demonstrating elite passing ability while also threatening as a runner, despite some doubts about his size. With the Titans in full rebuild mode, Ward won't have the easiest introduction to the NFL, but recent rookie success stories like Jayden Daniels and Bo Nix give some reason for optimism.

THE TECH THAT POWERS THE NFL

The NFL can legitimately claim to be the world's most high-tech sports league

THE WORLD'S MOST EXTENSIVE AV SUITES

A lot of people watch the NFL. A lot. So broadcasters around the world can't afford any slip ups. Thankfully, they have the technology in place to make sure every moment on the field is captured. Levi's Stadium's Sony-supplied AV set up is one of the world's most advanced and comprehensive. Featuring more than 2,200 LCD displays, it helps ensure that no detail is missed, no matter how small.

Levi's STADIUM
BUD LIGHT PATIO
CARDINALS AT 49ERS
WEEK 17
SONY
UNIVERSITY OF PHOENIX STADIUM

GIGANTIC HD SCOREBOARDS

In the NFL, bigger is better, and that applies to scoreboards too. The screen in Levi's Stadium, for example, stands at a mammoth 61 metres by 15 metres – and it's not even the largest in the league. It uses an innovative combination of traditional and transparent display technology, and displays with the help of over five million individual LEDs.

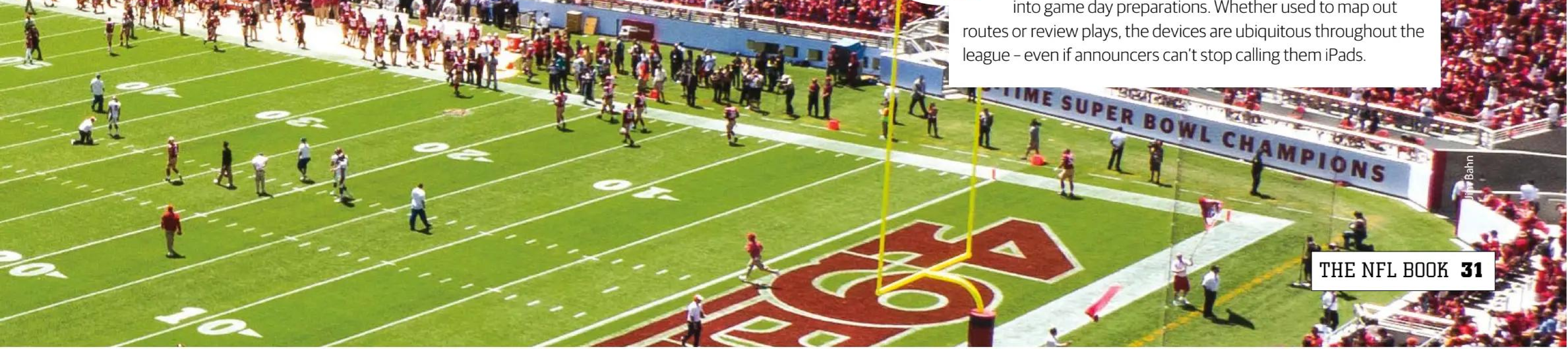
RETRACTABLE GRASS TO KEEP THE PLAYING FIELD FRESH

Though not yet installed at every NFL stadium, retractable grass is a key feature in some, notably the University of Phoenix Stadium in Arizona. A 200-foot opening lets the turf slide out from the Cardinals' home stadium when it's not in use, enabling it to be more easily tended.

While some sports and professional leagues around the world have been resistant to change and wary of new technologies, the same can't be said for the NFL. Throughout its history, the league has consistently been on the cutting edge of sporting innovation, a practice that continues to this day.

An instant replay system was first introduced to the NFL all the way back in 1986, while the current version of the tech was implemented in 1999 – allowing teams to challenge on-field rulings with video evidence should they choose. The technology available to players on the field has evolved significantly in recent years as well. While in the early days of the NFL, players would converse on the touchline with their coaching staff before carrying out plays, now the advent of built-in headsets means that offenses and defenses can adjust their positions and strategies instantaneously.

An array of sensors now track almost every physical statistic under the sun, with players and coaches able to review their movements with an unprecedented degree of precision. All of which means that analytics are more important in the NFL than ever. With new technology comes innovative new ways of playing the game, and the league's smartest teams are making good use of these advancements. Having a wealth of data on tap might not win games in itself, but it can certainly give teams an edge.



Jim Bahn

STATE-OF-THE-ART SECURITY SYSTEMS

With NFL games being among the world's most high-profile sporting events, no expense is spared on the custom security systems installed at each of the league's venues. For Super Bowl 50, held at Levi's Stadium, the NFL, police, Valley Transportation Authority and stadium staff were all linked through a brand new command post, enabling them to coordinate responses to any threats.

Levi's STADIUM

A FLOATING CAMERA THAT FLIES ABOVE THE GAME

Skycam is a familiar sight at many major sporting events nowadays, but it doesn't make the flying camera any less spectacular from a tech point of view. Four steel cables, motors and a gyroscope let the Skycam swoop and plunge across the whole field of play, combining close ups with wide pans for some breathtaking NFL footage.

HEADSETS THAT PROVIDE A SECURE AUDIO LINK

Originally limited to just the quarterback, every player on the field now has radio access to their coaching staff built into their helmets. This way coaches can dictate plays and converse with their signal callers on a fully secure line. This privacy is a crucial factor when trying to outfox the opposition.

MOTION SENSORS TO TRACK PLAYERS

Zebra Technologies' sensors have been used in the NFL for a number of years now, and they're getting more advanced every year. The tiny RFID (Radio Frequency Identification) chips sit in players' shoulder pads and deliver vital speed, distance and impact data to coaches and analysts on the field with minimal lag (just half a second).

SURFACE TABLETS THAT DISPLAY AN INTERACTIVE PLAYBOOK

Since signing a $400 million deal with the NFL in 2013, Microsoft's Surface tablets have been integrated into game day preparations. Whether used to map out routes or review plays, the devices are ubiquitous throughout the league – even if announcers can't stop calling them iPads.

McCULLUM
81

THE NFL INTERNATIONAL SERIES

One of the big knocks on American sports is how insular they can be. So how did football become a global game?

For years the rest of the world has pointed out, with much glee, that Americans are the only sports fans on Earth to crown the winners of their national competitions as 'world champions'. Baseball's winner-takes-all grand finale, the World Series, is another prime example. But, with football at least, that joke doesn't really ring true any more.

By the close of the 2024 season, 48 NFL regular season games have been played under the 'International Series' banner around the world, with more scheduled for seasons to come. In addition to the International Series games, regular and pre-season matches have taken place in Canada, along with dozens of exhibition games in Japan, the UK, Sweden, Germany, Spain, Ireland and Australia.

Such is the optimism around the sport in the UK that Premier League club Tottenham Hotspur designed its new 62,000-seater stadium to accommodate multiple NFL regular season games each year, with the hope of pocketing the huge cash windfall that comes with them. Next to the other traditional 'Big Four', football is by far the most widely exported sport. So how did we get here?

The league's first concerted effort – and its first big investment – into markets outside the US was the World League of American Football (WLAF), later renamed NFL Europe and then NFL Europa. It was a spring league played by teams based – at various times – in Canada, the US, the UK, Spain, Germany and the Netherlands.

★ The old Wembley Stadium in northwest London played host to the WLAF's first World Bowl in 1991

The objective was two-fold: to export NFL-branded pro football to European audiences and also to provide a format for younger and 'developmental' players to get more game time – much like the NBA's Summer League. The WLAF/NFL Europe ran with varying degrees of success from 1991 until 2007, at which point the focus of how the league would try to capture foreign audiences was shifting. In 2005 the league played its first regular season game abroad, a match-up between the Arizona Cardinals and the San Francisco 49ers, won by the Cardinals 31-14, in Mexico City's gargantuan Estadio Azteca. The game's attendance of more than 103,000 was, at the time, the largest ever in the NFL.

It wasn't the birth of the International Series, however, because it was played under the banner of NFL Futbol Americano. Mexico City would have to wait until the Oakland Raiders'

"Expanding the sport overseas – and especially to the United Kingdom – has been a priority of NFL commissioner Roger Goodell's"

Tottenham Hotspur's new stadium hosted two London games in 2019 for the first time

victory over the Houston Texans at the Azteca in November 2016 to get their first 'International Series' fix.

Expanding the sport overseas – and especially to the United Kingdom – has been a priority of NFL commissioner Roger Goodell's, with the league's overseer having repeatedly floated ideas such as a London franchise, a Wembley Super Bowl and additional games in the regular season for each team, with a number played on the same weekend outside the United States.

As the most fully realised of these proposals to date, the NFL International Series has been an unequivocal success. The first game was played between the New York Giants (who would go on to win that season's Super Bowl against a then-undefeated New England Patriots team) and the Miami Dolphins. Constant drizzle on the day combined with a dreadful game made for a less-than-compelling spectacle in which Eli Manning ran in the only touchdown.

Not that it mattered in the end, as the British crowds turned out in droves. More games were commissioned, with big name players like Tom Brady gracing the Wembley turf in the following years, and multiple games have been awarded to the UK from 2013 onwards. Twickenham also hosted games between 2016 and 2018, and from 2019 London games have had a new co-host in the Tottenham Hotspur stadium. Originally planned for 2018, construction delays pushed its introduction onto the NFL calendar back a year, but it kicked off on 6 October 2019 with the Oakland Raiders' win over the Chicago Bears.

Germany hosted its inaugural NFL regular season game in 2022 at Munich's Allianz Arena, bringing competitive football to mainland Europe for the first time and marking another milestone in the league's global expansion. And it's not stopping there. Brazil welcomed the NFL in 2024, and in 2025 the league will play games in both Madrid and Dublin, adding Spain and Ireland to its ever-growing list of international destinations. Melbourne, Australia, is set to follow in 2026.

The prospect of a permanent London franchise – as impractical as it sounds – is also still very much alive and well. Long backed by Goodell, it would, in all likelihood, see one of the lower-attended NFL franchises relocate to the UK capital. The Jaguars have long been mooted. Should that happen, it would mark the moment pro football truly became a global sport.

THE NFL COMES TO BRAZIL

The NFL's global expansion continued in 2024 as Brazil hosted its first regular season game in São Paulo. While much of the focus of the International Series has been on European markets, there is a massive and growing football fanbase in Latin America as well. With no games held in Mexico since 2022, it fell to Brazil to take up the torch. The result was a resounding success, with a crowd of more than 47,000 in attendance at Arena Corinthians to see a thrilling win for the Eagles over the Packers.

© Getty Images

ULTIMATE NFL JARGON BUSTER

If you don't know your touchdown from your touchback then you've come to the right place

A group of referees bring out the chains to see if the attacking team has reached the first down marker

AUDIBLE

Before a play begins, the quarterback will survey the defense's formation. If he decides to change the play, a new play – an audible – will be communicated to his team through pre-determined code words.

BACKFIELD

The area behind the line of scrimmage where the quarterback and any running backs line up before the play commences. A team's unit of running backs may also be referred to as a 'the backfield'.

BLITZ

A defense will split between attempting to put pressure on the quarterback and covering his pass. Players running at the quarterback are called blitzers and a play with more of them is called a blitz.

BLOCKING

Blocking is a crucial part of the football game. Linemen, or sometimes wide receivers, will stop the tacklers from getting to the ball-carrier. Multiple blockers can create holes through which a back can burst.

CENTER

The center plays at the middle of the offensive line and starts most plays at the line of scrimmage either by passing the ball back or flicking it several yards between his legs to the quarterback.

CHAINS

The first down marker on the sideline is attached to a ten-yard chain, the beginning of which is placed at the spot of the ball every time a first down is achieved.

Aaron Rodgers of the Green Bay Packers awaits the snap with a running back and a fullback in the backfield

CHALLENGE

If a coach disagrees with a referee's decision, he can ask for a video replay review. A coach is allowed two challenges per game, and a third if both of the first two are successful.

COMMISSIONER

The current NFL commissioner is Roger Goodell. As well as being the final authority in football, he is the public face of the league and is in charge of expanding and running the business.

COMPLETION

When a quarterback throws to his receiver, if they catch it cleanly in the field of play, it is ruled complete. Challenges are often used on whether a pass is complete or not.

CONFERENCE

The NFL is split into two halves, the American Football Conference (AFC) and National Football Conference (NFC). The playoffs are played within these conferences and the champion of each contest the Super Bowl.

COORDINATOR

A team will generally be run by the head coach, below which work an offensive coordinator and a defensive coordinator. Depending on the coach, the OC and DC may call plays as well.

CORNERBACK

Cornerbacks are often the fastest players active on the football pitch. Their job is to track wide receivers as they run down field and if possible intercept any passes thrown their way.

DEFENSIVE END

A defensive end lines up at the line of scrimmage and their job is to get to the quarterback for a sack or attempt to tackle running back.

DIVISION

Within the conferences, there are four loosely geographical divisions. Each team plays its divisional rivals twice a season and the winner of each division automatically qualifies for the playoffs.

DOWN

The basic aim of football is to move the ball ten yards in four attempts, otherwise known as downs. A failure to reach the ten yards on fourth down sees the ball turned over to the other team.

END ZONE

This is where touchdowns are scored. It is ten yards deep and extends the entire width of the pitch. If the ball is kicked through it (but not the posts) then a touchback is declared.

EXTRA POINT

After a touchdown, a team can kick a 33-yard field goal for the extra point or go for two points at the two-yard line with one attempt to get into the end zone.

FALSE START

One of the most common penalties, a false start is called when an offensive player moves before the ball is snapped.

FIELD GOAL

Apart from a touchdown, the other most common way to score points in football is by kicking the ball through the posts. It is often on these kicks that the closest games are decided.

FLAG

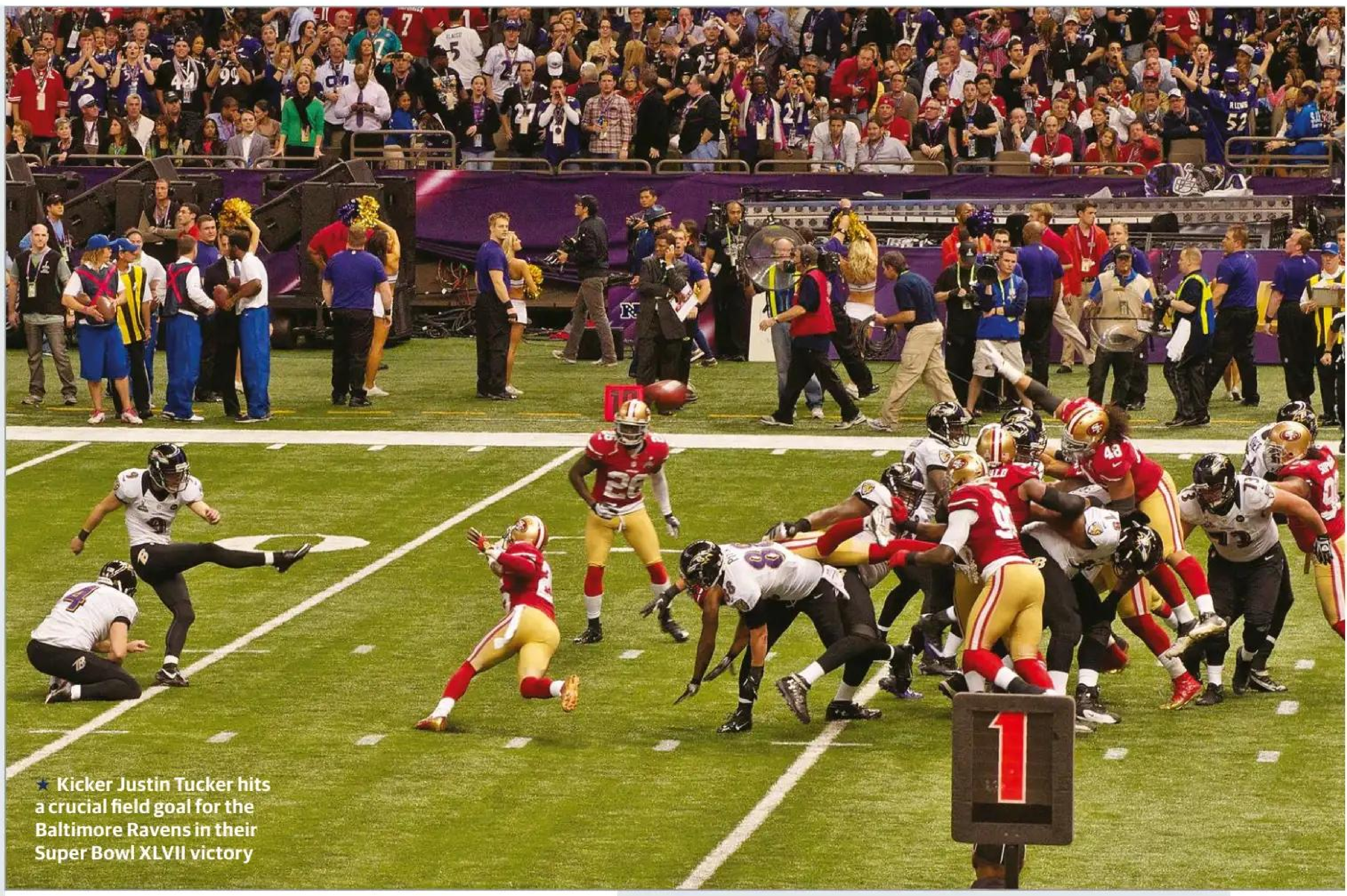
When a foul is committed, a referee will throw a yellow 'flag' which is more like a handkerchief with a beanbag in it. If the foul is later rescinded upon review, the referee will 'pick up the flag'.

FORWARD PROGRESS

Referees will blow a play dead (to be stopped) if a ball-carrier is no longer moving forward. The ball is then spotted as far forward as the runner made it, not where he was driven back to.

FREE AGENT

Contract negotiations in the NFL are some of the most complicated in sport, but an unrestricted free agent may sign for any franchise because his contract has expired. Younger players have more restrictions.



★ Kicker Justin Tucker hits a crucial field goal for the Baltimore Ravens in their Super Bowl XLVII victory

FULLBACK

A position that has begun to disappear, a fullback is like a bigger, broader running back. He will often block for the running back or bulldoze through tacklers when only a few yards are needed.

FUMBLE

In a sport where possession is crucial, giving it up is a cardinal sin. Fumbles generally happen when defenders steal the ball out of the hands of the ball-carrier before he is down.

GUARD

Guards are a type of offensive lineman and line up on either side of the center. They are often some of the best paid because of the importance of protecting the quarterback.

HAIL MARY

A Hail Mary play is a complete last resort. It involves receivers running to the end zone and the quarterback launching the ball up in the air, making it 'up for grabs'. Success is rare but generally game-winning.

HANDOFF

A quarterback, when taking the ball, will either keep and throw it, or hand it off to his running back. Faking a handoff only to throw the ball to distract a defense is called play action.

HOLDING

Generally a penalty given on the line, it is when a blocker or rusher has grabbed or dragged down his opponent as opposed to pushing which is an allowed form of tackling. It is the second most common penalty in the game.

HUDDLE

Before each play, the offense will huddle up to plan a play. The quarterback will communicate, in pre-learned code, the play to each player. Teams may start playing 'no huddle' to rush defenses.

INTERCEPTION

Sometimes called a pick, cornerbacks and safeties spend their life praying for interceptions. Having stolen a pass, a defender can run the ball back for a touchdown – a pick-six.

KICKER

A kicker is naturally all about his leg, as it is his job to kick the ball a fair distance to score. Often an undervalued member of a team, the best kickers can produce winning field goals on a regular basis while their mistakes can go down in history.

LATERAL

A rarity in football due to the likelihood of a fumble, a team can pass the ball backwards on a play as many times as they want while only one forward pass is permitted.

LINE OF SCRIMMAGE

This moves with the spot of the ball and determines where each play starts. The width of the ball on the line across the pitch is called the neutral zone.

LINEBACKER

Defenses generally play three or four linebackers on any one play. They can be sent to blitz, wait to make a tackle or drop into coverage to mark a receiver. They often lead the defense.

LINEMEN

The linemen are usually the biggest and strongest men on most football teams. The general term covers all of the defensive and offensive players who get down on their hands at the line of scrimmage.

VINCE LOMBARDI TROPHY

Named after the coach who won the first two Super Bowls with the Green Bay Packers, this is the reward for the league champion each year. Each player also receives a custom Super Bowl ring.

MOTION

As part of an audible, a quarterback may call a receiver into motion by calling his number and a coded message. He can then move position on the line before the play starts.

ONSIDE KICK

Kicking the ball off generally returns the ball to the opposition, however in desperate situations the kicking team can try the ever-tricky onside kick. The ball must travel ten yards, after which it may be recovered.

OVERTIME

If the scores are tied after four quarters, play in overtime will decide a winner. The first touchdown wins or any score after both teams have had possession of the ball.

PASS INTERFERENCE

Pushing and grabbing a receiver before the ball arrives – pass interference – is illegal and the penalty is awarded 'on the spot of the foul' meaning it can be a huge yardage.

PLAYOFFS

The first goal of every team at the beginning of the season is to make the playoffs. Winning your division or having one of the best two records in your conference outside the divisional champions will get you there.

POCKET

Protection of the quarterback is very important. The area of space around him is known as the pocket. If it starts to collapse, he will either quickly throw or scramble out into more space.

★ The Oakland Raiders and Miami Dolphins linemen at the line of scrimmage just before the snap

★ Lawrence Tynes of the New York Giants with the famous Vince Lombardi Trophy after winning it for the second time

PUNTER

If the ball is too far away for the team to kick a field goal, most teams will punt the ball away. The ideal punt is long but also high, to allow the kicking team's players to prevent a return.

QUARTERBACK

Quarterbacks are assessed on IQ and physical attributes because of the knowledge required to play this skill position. While most QBs focus on throwing, some also run with the ball to add an extra dimension.

RUNNING BACK

Famously a position where injury is a constant worry, most running backs end up rather battered and bruised in many games they play. Styles can vary from pure speed backs to 'downhill' runners who go through tacklers rather than around them.

RUSH

This is simply a term for running the ball in offense. A back will have a certain number of 'rushing yards' per game or even per year. However, blitzing can also be called rushing.

SACK

When a defender tackles the quarterback before he has had the opportunity to throw a forward pass, he is awarded a sack. However, if he hits him too late he can be penalised for 'roughing the passer'.

SAFETY

Safeties provide deep cover if a receiver beats his cornerback. However the word can also refer to an attacker being tackled with the ball in his own end zone, which earns the defense two points.

SCRAMBLE

If the pocket collapses and no-one is open, a quarterback still has an option. He can run – or scramble – to gain yardage. Some more athletic QBs use this as a regular strategy.

SECONDARY

You might sometimes here announcers talk about a back 'breaking into the secondary'. This means he has beaten the first line of defense and is running in more open field where there are fewer defenders.

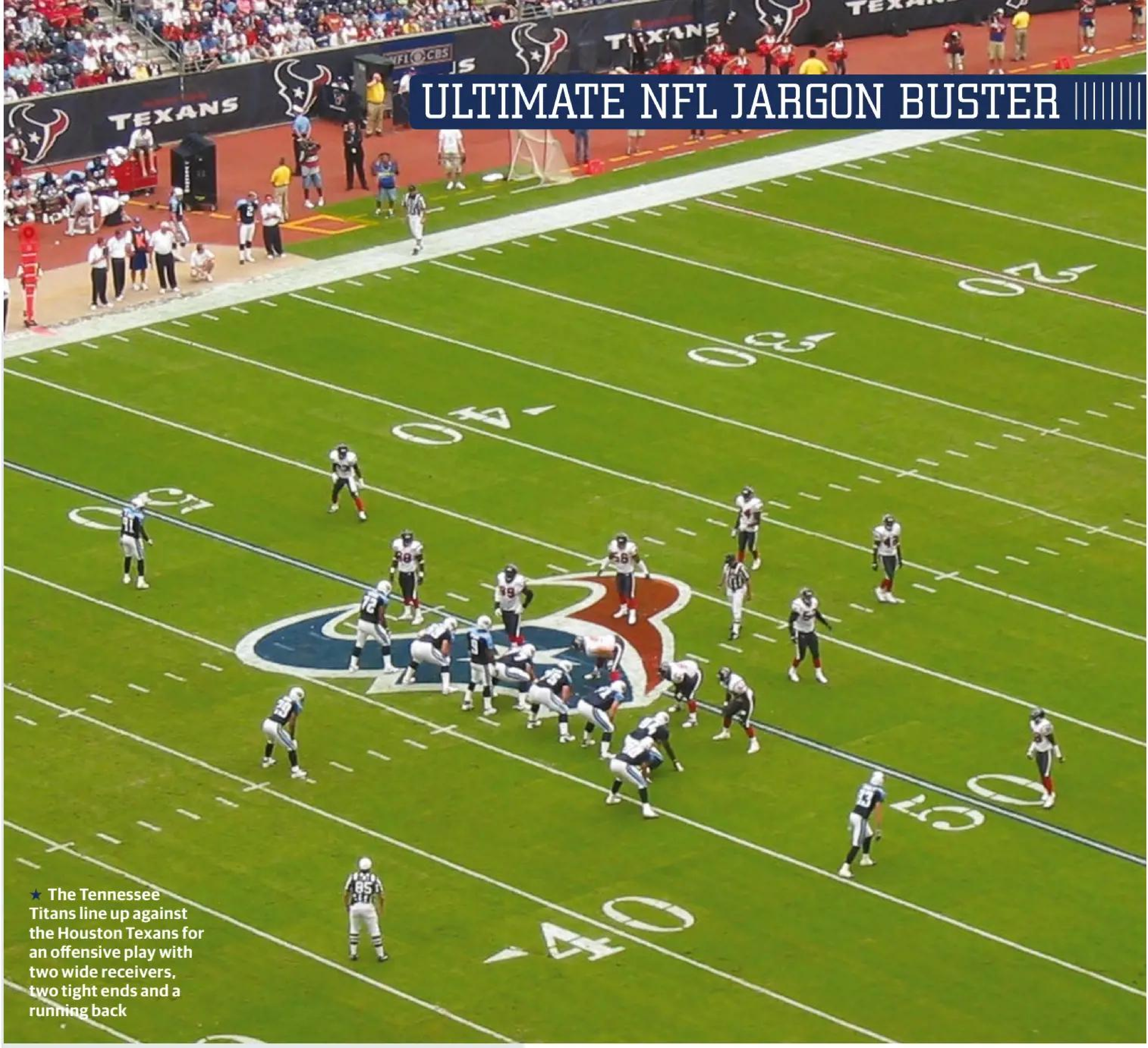
SHOTGUN

Depending on the type of play, a quarterback may stand five to seven yards behind the line of scrimmage to receive the snap. Otherwise he will generally receive the ball right behind the line, or 'under center'.

SNAP

Apart from kickoff, every play starts with a snap, even punts and kicks at goal. The center will either pass it or throw it between his legs to the quarterback after which the ball is live.

★ Tom Brady of the New England Patriots stands in the pocket and scans the field for an open receiver



★ The Tennessee Titans line up against the Houston Texans for an offensive play with two wide receivers, two tight ends and a running back

SPIKE

If a player is tackled in the field of play, the clock will not stop. To save a timeout, a quarterback may stop the clock by throwing the ball to the ground.

SPOT OF THE BALL

After each play, the referees will decide where the ball stopped and the spot on which to start the next play. This also determines whether a first down or a touchdown has been achieved.

SUPER BOWL

Often the most viewed television event of the year, the Super Bowl is the final of the NFL. It is played between the AFC and NFC champions for the Vince Lombardi Trophy. Currently played on the first Sunday in the month of February.

TACKLE

Tackles are a type of lineman which appear on defense and offense. Defenses will usually send out one (a nose) or two while offenses have two. The word can also refer to stopping a ball-carrier.

TIGHT END

Tight end is a position that used to be about strength and blocking with the occasional catch, but more recently it has become a more diverse role. Tight ends line up next to the tackle and can block or catch.

TIMEOUT

Each team is given three timeouts per half of a short duration with which they can stop the clock whenever they want. These are very valuable if a team is behind late in the game.

TOUCHBACK

If the ball is kicked through the end zone or a defender takes a knee after grabbing the ball, a touchback is called. The next play will start from the 20-yard line.

TOUCHDOWN

A player taking the ball into the opposition end zone scores six points for a touchdown. A player simply has to 'break the plane' of the end zone with the ball while maintaining possession to score.

TURNOVER

Possession can be lost by throwing an interception, fumbling the ball or failing to convert on fourth down. Playing a punt or kick also surrenders possession of the ball. Losing the ball without kicking is called a turnover.

WIDE RECEIVER

These players are responsible for catching passes and scoring touchdowns. They are broken into slot receivers, who are generally smaller and play more centrally, and wideouts, who make more deep runs, but some players can play both.

“Since the very first Super Bowl, the hopes and dreams of fans and players alike have come to a head here”

THE SUPER BOWL

With hundreds of millions of people tuning in to watch every year, the Super Bowl has become one of the greatest spectacles in all of sport

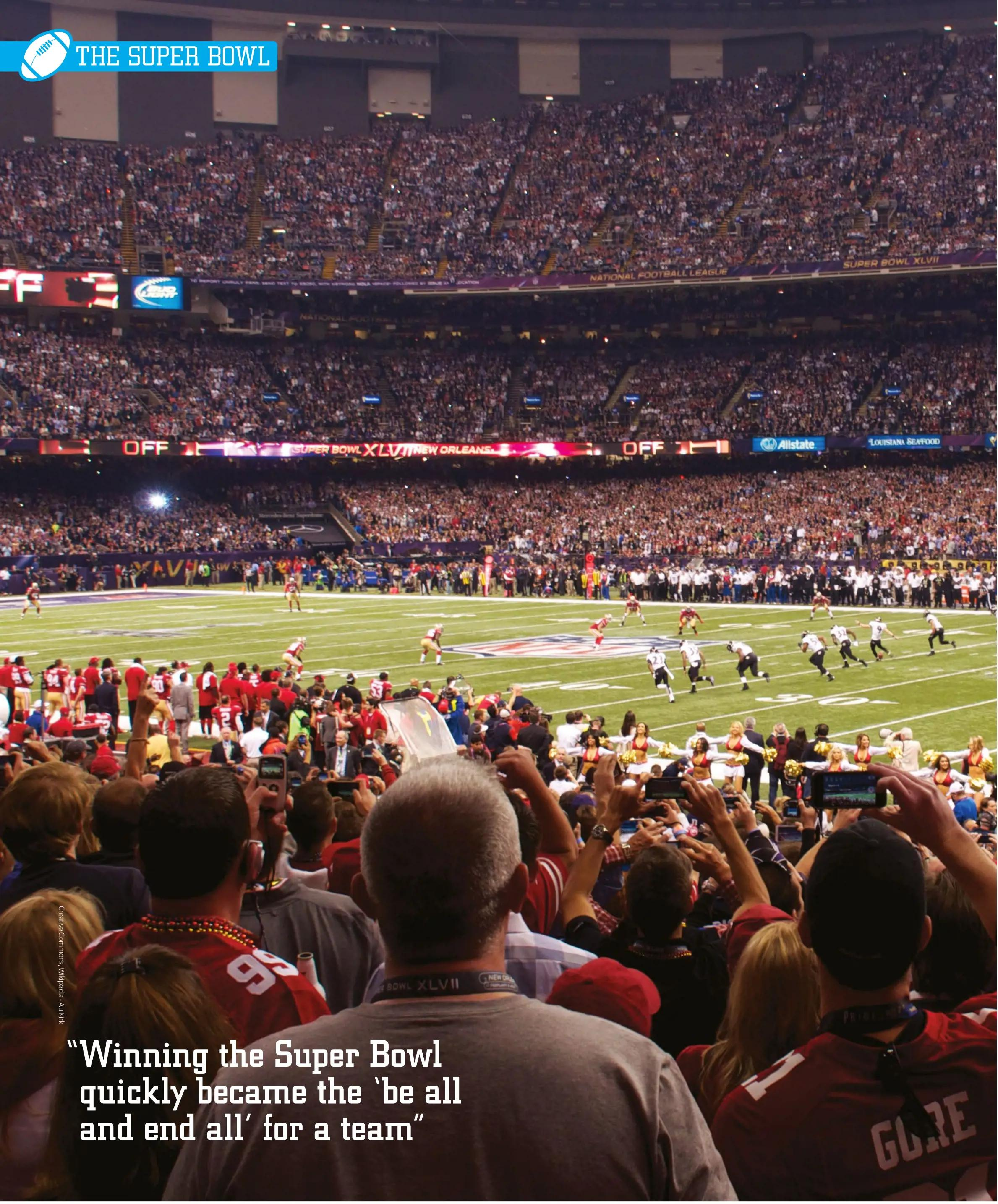
Super Bowl LIX was watched by 127.7 million viewers. It's a mind-boggling figure, but it also highlights just how much of a phenomenon the NFL's biggest occasion has become. Attracting fans from all corners of the world each and every year, it's now far more than just the culmination of the NFL calendar. It's a must-see event with mass appeal, one able to boast the biggest stars in pop culture, who are privileged to perform during its half-time show.

More important, though, is the stage it sets for ambitious NFL teams. Serving as both a proving ground and a place where legacies are secured, the Super Bowl is overflowing with moments that football fans consider to be among the best ever. Be that an underdog overcoming the odds or a last-minute play that rewrites history, no one ever sits down on Super Bowl Sunday thinking that they won't be entertained.

From the instant the Green Bay Packers defeated the Kansas City Chiefs in the first edition of the game in Los Angeles in 1967, the hopes and dreams of fans and players alike have come to a head here. Be it Joe Montana's last-ditch touchdown pass in Super Bowl XXIII or Joe Namath defying the critics in Super Bowl III, there are few sporting experiences that carry the same weight or emotion.

Better still, it shows no signs of slowing down. At Super Bowl LIX, the Philadelphia Eagles ended the Kansas City Chiefs' recent dominance with a 40-22 victory. Hopefully this season's showpiece will be just as exciting, but who will the contenders be? Only time will tell.

40. THE HISTORY OF THE SUPER BOWL
44. 2024 SEASON REVIEW
50. SUPER BOWL LIX



SUPER BOWL XLVII
NATIONAL FOOTBALL LEAGUE
OFF
SUPER BOWL XLVII NEW ORLEANS
Allstate
LOUISIANA SEAFOOD
GORE

Creative Commons; Wikipedia - Au Kirk

"Winning the Super Bowl quickly became the 'be all and end all' for a team"

NEW ORLEANS
Ochsner
15:00
SMITH
99

★ Thousands of people pack stadiums every year for the Super Bowl, including a 103,219 crowd at Cowboys Stadium in 2011

THE HISTORY OF THE SUPER BOWL

From American pastime to the world's biggest sporting event, the Super Bowl has become a phenomenon

Ever since Super Bowl I on 15 January 1967, the showpiece game of the football season has gone from strength to strength. Proving itself to be one of the most popular sporting events on the planet, the ongoing battle between the champions of the NFC and AFC is one that will undoubtedly rage for years to come. The world just wouldn't have it any other way.

From the NFL's inception in 1920, it faced constant threats from other leagues wanting to rise up and take its place. With the sport still in its relative infancy, other organisations had ambitions to become the dominant power as its popularity started to increase, but no one was successful in overtaking the momentum and foresight the NFL had shown. That is until the American Football League (AFL) was formed.

Established in 1960, the AFL was predominately made up of disgruntled owners who had been refused NFL franchises. The organisation was, at first, anything but a success. When it secured a television contract with ABC (subsequently followed by one with NBC), however, business started to pick up. For a start, AFL games were more offensive-minded than NFL matches, making them far more appealing to a TV-viewing audience. As its buzz started to grow and its ability to attract the best college athletes and major NFL stars increased, the league became a key player. More importantly, by 1965 it had become a thorn in the NFL's side.

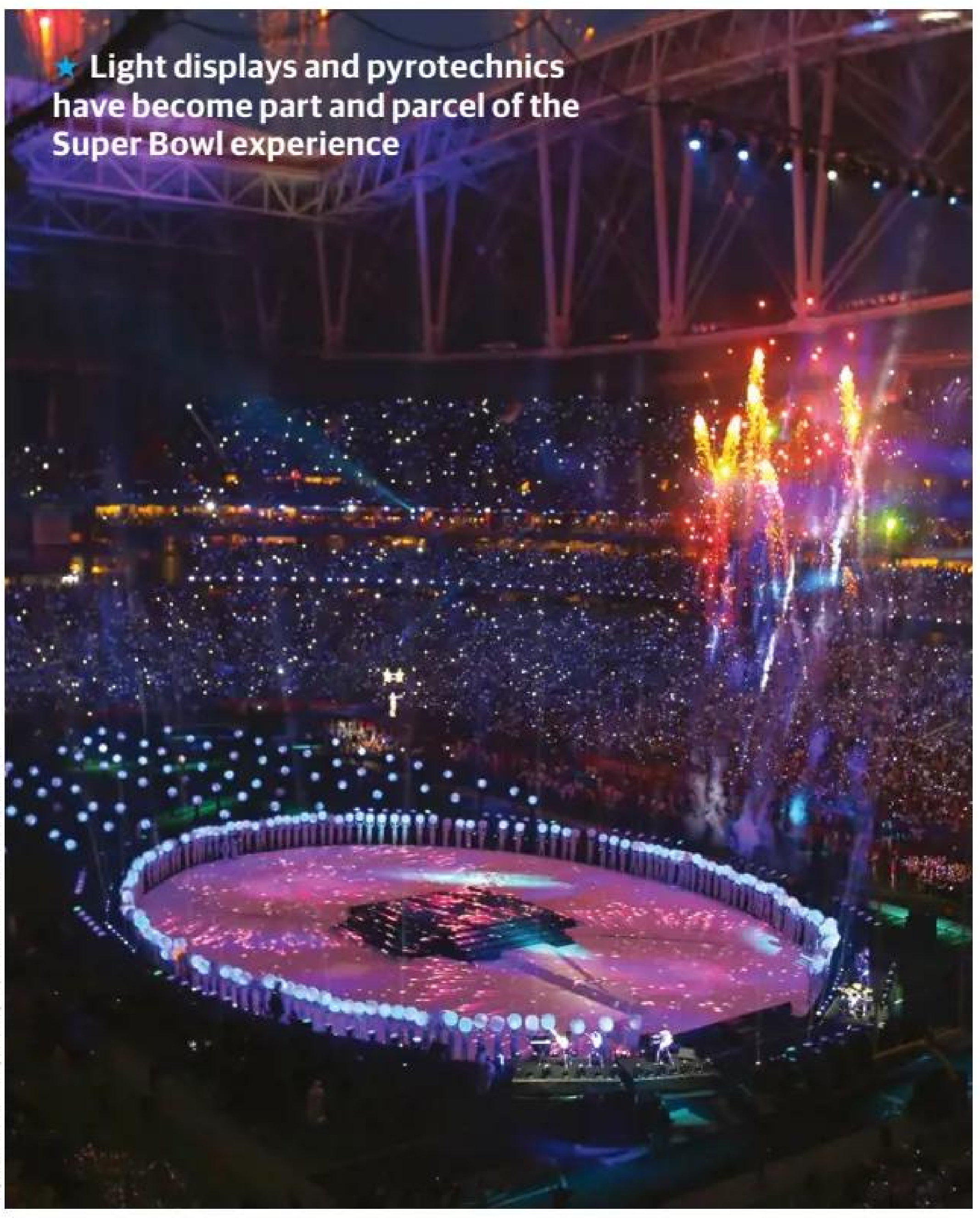
Realising that neither could afford a long-term battle, the two powerhouses agreed upon a merger before the 1966 season that would go into effect in 1970. Up until that point – and long after it – both signed off on a 'world championship game' where the winners from each league would meet to fight for dominance for that year. Jokingly named the 'Super Bowl' by then-Kansas City Chiefs owner Lamar Hunt in a letter to NFL commissioner Pete Rozell, the name stuck, even though it took until Super Bowl III for everyone involved to accept that the 'AFL-NFL Championship Game' title just wasn't going to work.

The National Football Conference currently leads the American Football Conference 30-29 in total Super Bowl wins, and rivalries between the conferences throughout the years have been fierce. The first team to stamp their influence on the occasion were the Green Bay Packers, who won the first two Super Bowls back to back. Guided forward by double MVP-winning quarterback Bart Starr, this didn't come as a huge surprise given how successful Green Bay had been in the years leading up to the event's debut; they had won the NFL Championship in 1961, 1962 and

HALF-TIME HEROES

★ **The Super Bowl's half-time show is now as synonymous with the event as the game itself.** With TV ratings and mass appeal at an all-time high, the NFL has taken into account how important it is to secure mainstream attractions to ensure a broad audience and national interest (which allows them to keep ad revenue high). It wasn't until 1991 that pop artists took over, however, when New Kids On The Block took centre stage. Prior to this, half-time shows were themed, often featuring a marching band of some kind. When pop royalty Michael Jackson performed in 1993, it was clear that the Super Bowl had rejected traditional entertainment for good.

★ Rap royalty took to the stage at Super Bowl LVI in Los Angeles in one of the most impressive half-time shows in recent years



★ Light displays and pyrotechnics have become part and parcel of the Super Bowl experience

Creative Commons, Wikipedia - Joe Parks

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DOWN
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BALL ON
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The Power of People
Entergy
SUPER BOWL
XLVII

★ The pageantry and grandiose nature of the Super Bowl gets bigger and bigger every year, right down to the over-the-top entrances

Creative Commons, Wikipedia - Au Kirk

1965. If anyone was going to come out of the gates flying, it was always going to be the Packers.

This all changed at Super Bowl III, though, thanks to the AFL's New York Jets and, more specifically, quarterback Joe Namath. Going into the game the Jets couldn't have been considered more of an underdog. Pitted against the Baltimore Colts – who were the 18-point favourite before kick-off – Namath famously lambasted the press and anyone who had already counted his team out. Dismissed as arrogance at the time, he backed up every word when the Jets claimed a famous 16-7 victory. It's still remembered to this day as a classic.

The AFL's insistence that it be seen as an equal to the NFL continued the following year at Super Bowl IV, as the Kansas City Chiefs defeated the Minnesota Vikings 23-7. These were the first signs that the division was more than a match for its rival, and the Super Bowl quickly became a must-see event in the sporting calendar.

Super Bowl V put a totally new twist on proceedings, however. With the merger between the two leagues now complete, a greater sense of urgency began to make itself known. Winning the Super Bowl quickly became the 'be all and end all' for any team. While new AFC member the Baltimore Colts would finally secure victory with a win over the Dallas Cowboys (in the only Super Bowl in which the MVP award has gone to a member of the losing team), three names began to rise to prominence throughout the 1970s.

The first of these was the aforementioned Cowboys, who picked themselves up after their loss the previous year and beat the Miami Dolphins 24-3 at Super Bowl VI. A pattern of a defeated team being rejuvenated the following season began to emerge. Not only did former losers the Dolphins lift the Vince Lombardi trophy at Super Bowl VII, but they went 14-0 during the regular season en route to the title. The only time a team has had a perfect run, Miami continued to shock the world in 1974 when they once again stood tall at the end of the season. Crushing the Minnesota Vikings 24-7 at Super Bowl VIII, they were the franchise to watch – or so everyone thought.

With a total of six Super Bowl crowns to their name, the Pittsburgh Steelers are the most decorated team in history (alongside the New England Patriots), and it all started in 1975. Coached by Chuck Noll, Pittsburgh not only took the gold home in Super Bowl IX but also did so at X, XIII and XIV, pulling off four victories in just six years. Between these victories, the only teams who were able to snatch away the trophy were the Oakland Raiders and the Dallas Cowboys.

A new decade brought about change once more, however, mostly thanks to a resurgence from the NFC, whose teams went undefeated from Super Bowl XIX in 1985 to XXXI in 1997. The San Francisco 49ers, Chicago Bears, Washington Redskins, New York Giants and the Oakland Raiders managed to be the standout teams throughout the 1980s, with the Dallas Cowboys truly realising their potential in the 1990s, cementing themselves as a side who would become forever associated with the sport. Going all the way in 1993, 1994 and 1996, they also controlled the NFC Conference, getting to the postseason every year except for 1990 and 1997.

The end of the decade and beginning of the new millennium would see the pendulum swing back in the AFC's favour, however. Upsetting Green Bay at Super Bowl XXXII, the Denver Broncos and Hall Of Famer quarterback John Elway reversed the division's fortunes, breaking a 13-year NFC winning streak that few thought would end. But

> "The Super Bowl is the foremost showcase of achievement, talent and spectacle"

Creative Commons, Wikipedia - Jeffrey Beall

THE BEST OF THE BEST

You're never going to find two people in agreement over which Super Bowl is the greatest of all time – there are just too many variables. What's hard to argue against, however, is that the New England Patriots have been involved in two of the most dramatic games in history. Both were incredible underdog victories, but the circumstances in each couldn't have been more different.

In 2008 the Patriots were, quite literally, unstoppable. Winning every game of the regular and postseason, their record stood at 18-0 going into the showcase game. The New York Giants had other ideas, though, and quarterback Eli Manning ultimately led the outsiders to a thrilling comeback win.

In Super Bowl LI, however, the Pats' coach and quarterback duo of Bill Belichick and Tom Brady pulled off an even greater upset. Trailing 28-3 to the Atlanta Falcons in the third quarter, they rallied to complete an overtime comeback for the ages.

it was Super Bowl XXXVI when a genuine new contender emerged.

A success story that's still sung about today, the arrival of quarterback Tom Brady and the New England Patriots is legendary. Surprising the world in 2002 by upsetting the St Louis Rams, the Patriots would go on to win the championship in 2004 and 2005, repeating the success a decade later at Super Bowl XLIX and again in 2017 before falling to first-time winners the Philadelphia Eagles in 2018. They weren't done, though, coming back in 2019 and winning a sixth Super Bowl against the now-relocated LA Rams.

The outstanding candidates to succeed the Patriots dynasty are undoubtedly the Patrick Mahomes-led Kansas City Chiefs, who were victorious in the 2019, 2022 and 2023 seasons, though they were defeated in 2021 in Super Bowl LV by who else but Brady, this time with the Tampa Bay Buccaneers. The Chiefs again made the big game at the climax of the 2024 season, aiming for an unprecedented three-peat. This time around, though, they were thwarted by a dominant Philadelphia Eagles team and beaten 40-22.

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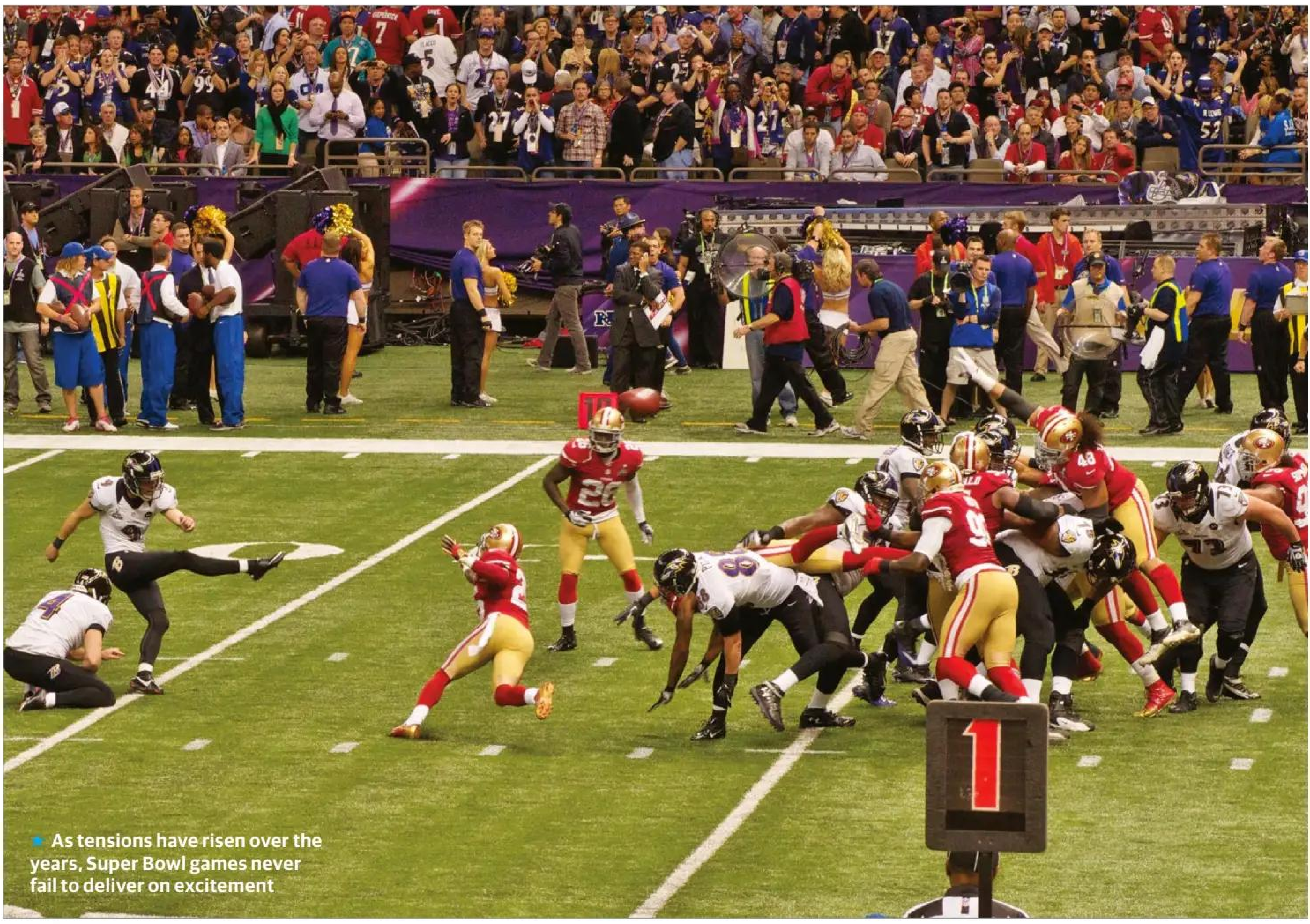

As tensions have risen over the years, Super Bowl games never fail to deliver on excitement

★ The Chiefs prevail yet again in the annual Bills-Chiefs playoff clash

© Todd Rosenberg/Getty Images

2024 SEASON REVIEW

Could anyone stop the Chiefs from winning a third consecutive Super Bowl title?

The 2024 season opened with one question on everybody's mind – could Kansas City become the first team to win three Super Bowls in a row? As is always the case when a team enjoys prolonged success, most people were firmly rooting against them by this stage, but that didn't stop them from rattling off wins in their first nine games.

Other teams were not so slick, and the season can seem brutally short to those who fall behind early on. That was especially true of the AFC East, where the Dolphins, Patriots and Jets all managed to fall four games behind the Bills after just eight weeks. None of them were able to recover.

Cincinnati fell into a hole of similar proportions, finding themselves at 4-8 after 13 weeks. Despite their best efforts (they won five in a row to end the season) they failed to qualify for the playoffs – ironically because the Chiefs rested their big names in their final game and gifted Denver a win. Pittsburgh were on the other side of the experience – losing their last four games but still making the playoffs thanks to their strong start to the year.

In the NFC, Detroit were the team to watch after coming so close to making their first Super Bowl a year earlier. After week 14 they shared the best record in the league with the Chiefs, both standing at 12-1 and looking close to unbeatable. The question was, would battling through a brutal NFC Division blunt their challenge before the really big games?

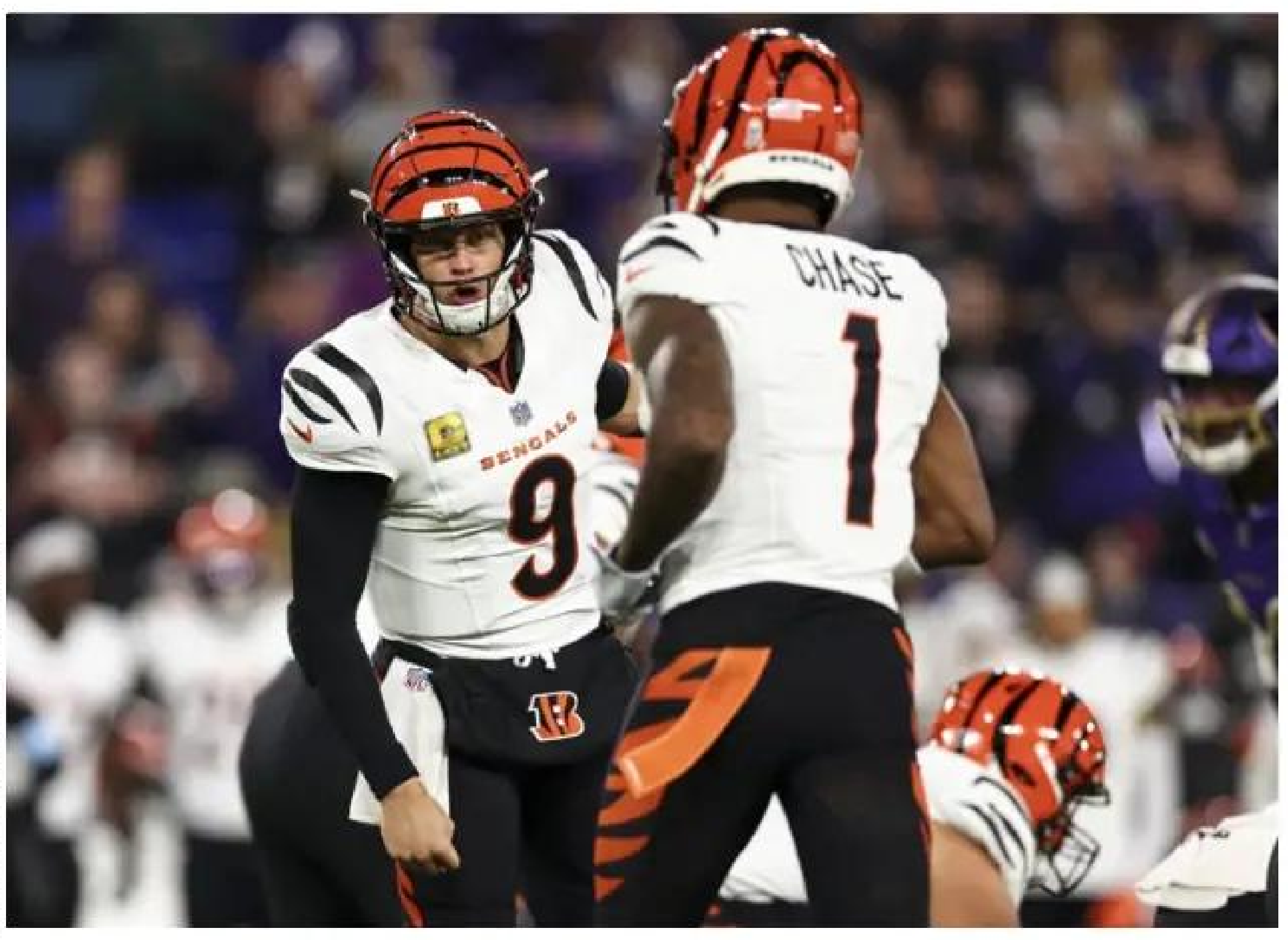
The playoffs opened with a couple of surprises. The Vikings, who had looked strong behind a reborn Sam Darnold, were anything but against the Rams, ultimately surrendering meekly in a 27-9 defeat. Washington, meanwhile, found a way past the vastly more experienced Buccaneers. Surely they would fall when they faced the Lions, who were fresh off a bye week?

In perhaps the best game of the postseason, the upstart Commanders traded punches with

> “The Eagles were in the Super Bowl for the second time in three years”

© Elsa/Getty Images

★ **Saquon Barkley leaps a defender... backwards**



© Kevin Sabitus/Getty Images

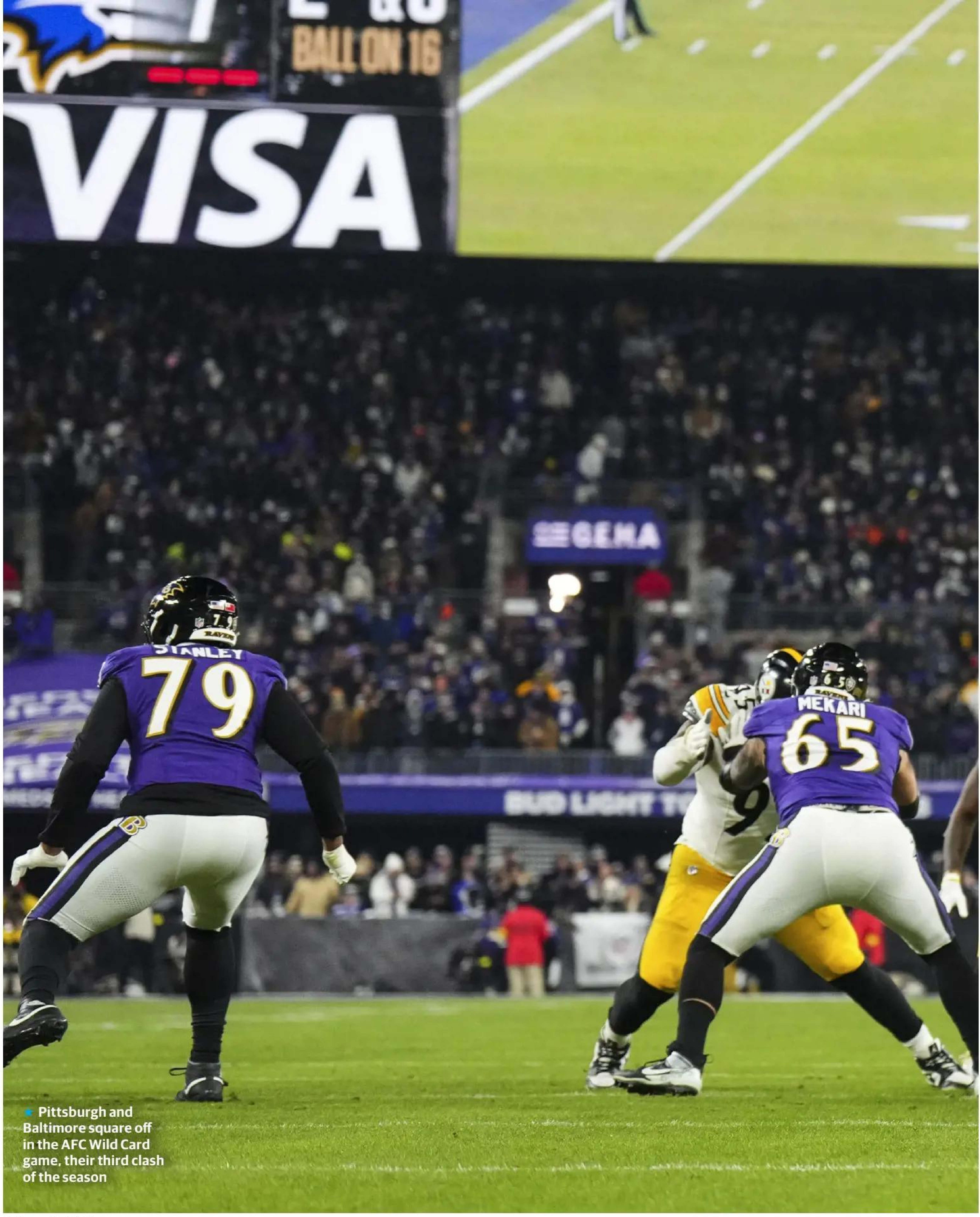
★ **The best pass-catch duo in the game was on the outside looking in when the postseason started**

© Brooke Sutton/Getty Images

★ **The organised chaos of the 'Brotherly Shove'**

© Perry Knotts/Getty Images

★ **Sam Darnold in action during his breakout season**



★ **Pittsburgh and Baltimore square off in the AFC Wild Card game, their third clash of the season**

© Cooper Neill/Getty Images

their favoured opponents and then pulled away with two fourth-quarter touchdowns to secure a stunning 45-31 win and a place in the NFC Championship Game. Their opponents would be the Eagles, riding a dazzling season by Saquon Barkley (able to leap a tall building with a single bound, sometimes even backwards) and also the unstoppable 'Brotherly Shove', which the Eagles have utilised effectively since 2022.

Having earned two relatively narrow playoff victories, the Eagles ramped things up against Washington, steamrollering them with a ground game that amassed 229 yards and seven touchdowns. The Eagles were in the Super Bowl for the second time in three years.

In the AFC, despite the quality of the Baltimore Ravens, few people had any doubt that the Bills and Chiefs were on a collision course once more. Sure enough, for the fourth time in five seasons, the two AFC heavyweights faced off in the playoffs, after the Bills took care of Denver and Baltimore in the early rounds, and the Chiefs handled Houston after a bye in the Wild Card round.

The Bills could be forgiven for having a complex abut facing the Chiefs. In each of those previous four meetings their season ended at the hands of Patrick Mahomes, and this time proved to be no different. Despite the Bills repeatedly finding a way back into the game, the Chiefs repeatedly found a way to retake the initiative and finally won on a 35-yard Harrison Butker field goal.

Super Bowl LIX would be a repeat of Super Bowl LVII... but would the result be the same?

It had been another season of superlative performances, both team and individual. Josh Allen continued the quarterbacks' monopoly on the MVP award – you have to go back to 2012 for the last time a non-quarterback won (Minnesota running back Adrian Peterson, in case you were wondering). Allen prevented Lamar Jackson from winning a second straight MVP title by an agonisingly narrow margin – 378 votes to 352.

Saquon Barkley led the league in rushing, with 2,005 yards and was voted Offensive Player of the Year, while Denver's Patrick Surtain won the defensive equivalent after establishing a no-fly zone for the league's quarterbacks.

Kevin O'Connell was Coach of the Year after guiding the Vikings to a surprising 14-3 record on the back of Sam Darnold's career-best year. Bengals duo Joe Burrow (who also won the Comeback Player of the Year Award for the second time) and Ja'Marr Chase took the passing and receiving titles with 4,918 and 1,708 yards, respectively, but those who argue that this is now too much of a passing league overlook the fact that the Bengals did not even make the playoffs.

There was the usual crop of great rookie performances too, as Washington quarterback Jayden Daniels and Philadelphia linebacker Jared Verse won the Offensive and Defensive Rookie of the Year honours. As always seems to be the case, the future of the NFL looks to be in good hands.

★ Washington surprise everyone by stopping Detroit in their tracks in the Divisional Round

©Michael Owens/Getty Images

TOP 10 MOMENTS

AT ANY MOMENT, THE NFL CAN THRILL OR SHOCK YOU, BREAKING HEARTS AND BRINGING ECSTASY IN EQUAL MEASURE. HERE ARE 10 OF THE MOST MEMORABLE MOMENTS FROM THE 2024 SEASON…

AN ANSWER TO A PRAYER

★Hail Mary passes almost never work, so Chicago's Tyrique Stevenson had some fun taunting the Washington crowd as Jayden Daniels prepared for a do-or-die play at the end of a week eight encounter. He should have stayed focused, because Daniels (nursing injured ribs) avoided the pass-rush and launched a bomb towards the end zone. After travelling nearly 65 yards, the ball was tipped by Stevenson and fell into the arms of Noah Brown for the game-winning score.

© Scott Taetsch/Getty Images

★ Noah Brown is all alone in the end zone for the winning score against Chicago

DICKER'S FREE KICK

© Cooper Neill/Getty Images

★Who knew you could attempt an uncontested field goal if you fair catch a punt? The Chargers coaching staff knew it, and a 15-yard penalty for interfering with the fair catch put them just about in Cameron Dicker's range. His 57-yard kick marked the first time anyone had scored in such a fashion for 48 years, and it also beat the previous longest uncontested kick, by Paul Hornung, way back in 1964.

WITH A LITTLE HELP FROM HIS FRIENDS

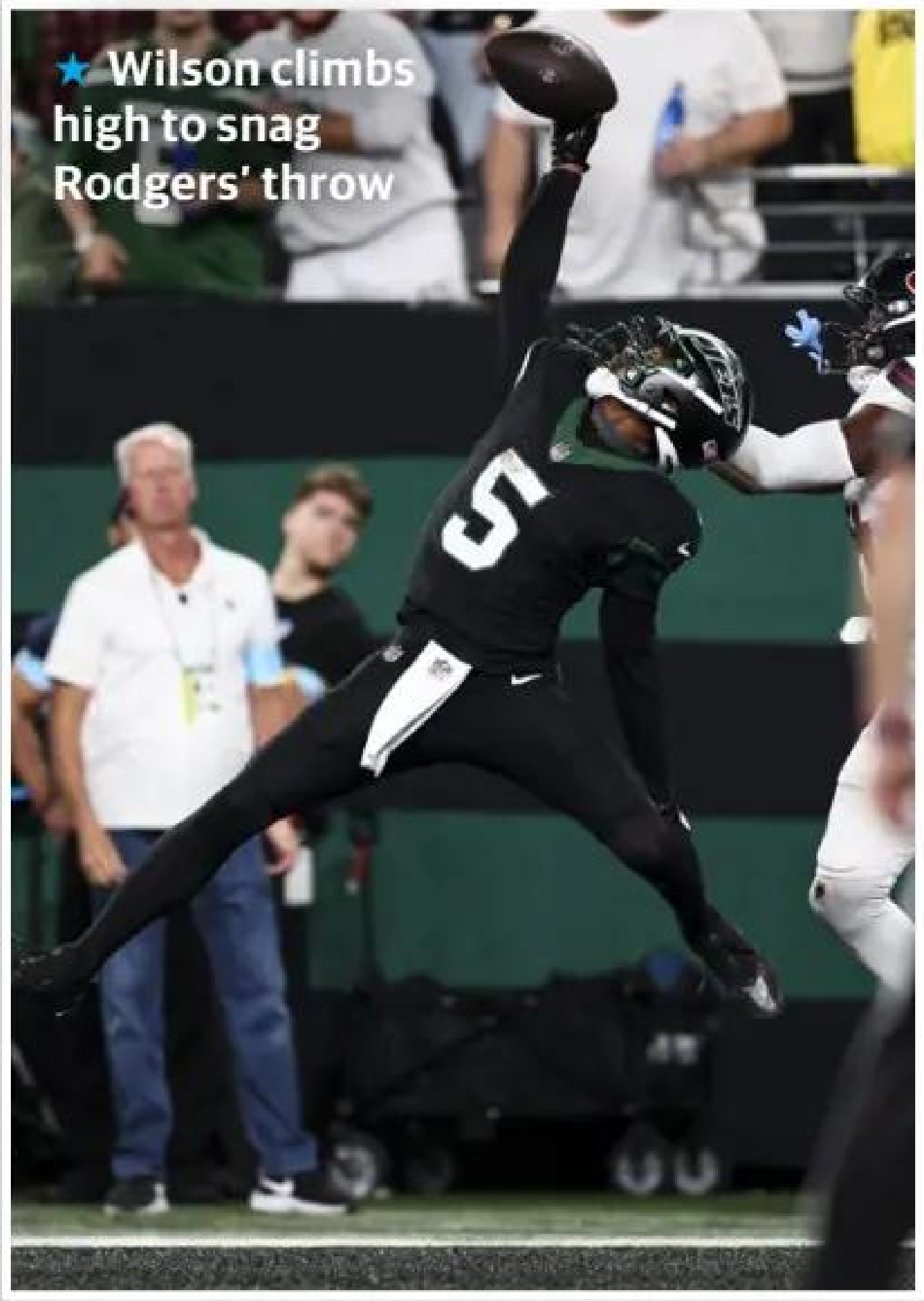
© Brooke Sutton/Getty Images

★The game description simply says 'Javonte Williams 14-yard rush', but this play from the Broncos-Falcons game in week 11 was so much more than that. After taking the handoff from Bo Nix, Williams was stood up inside the five and appeared to be stopped… but then five more Broncos turned up to deliver a passable impression of a rolling maul from a rugby match, and Williams was carried into the end zone.

ALLEN PLAYS CATCH… WITH HIMSELF

★Josh Allen sometimes looks like he should be wearing a Superman cape, and never was that truer than when he threw and caught the same touchdown pass. Against the 49ers, in week 13, his pass to Amari Cooper was caught, but Cooper threw a lateral back to Allen, who took the ball in for the score. He was only the fourth player in league history to be credited with both a touchdown throw and catch on the same play.

© Bryan Bennett/Getty Images



★ Wilson climbs high to snag Rodgers' throw

© Kevin Sabitus/Getty Images

CATCH AS CATCH CAN

★ The Jets were sinking fast when they played Houston in week nine, but Garrett Wilson had a treat in store. In the third quarter, Aaron Rodgers lofted a hopeful pass to the back of the end zone, and Wilson contorted his body to reach up and grab the ball in one hand, before just about coming down with his shin inbounds for a 26-yard score.

THE FASTEST MAN IN THE NFL

★ KaVontae Turpin is considered the NFL's speediest player, and he proved it on a crazy kick return against the Commanders in week 12. After muffing the kick, he calmly scooped the ball up in one hand on his own one-yard line, then jogged to the 10. From there he planted his foot, spun through 360 degrees, and exploded upfield, easily outpacing the coverage unit to score.

© Patrick Smith/Getty Images

★ Al-Shaair protests his innocence after levelling Lawrence

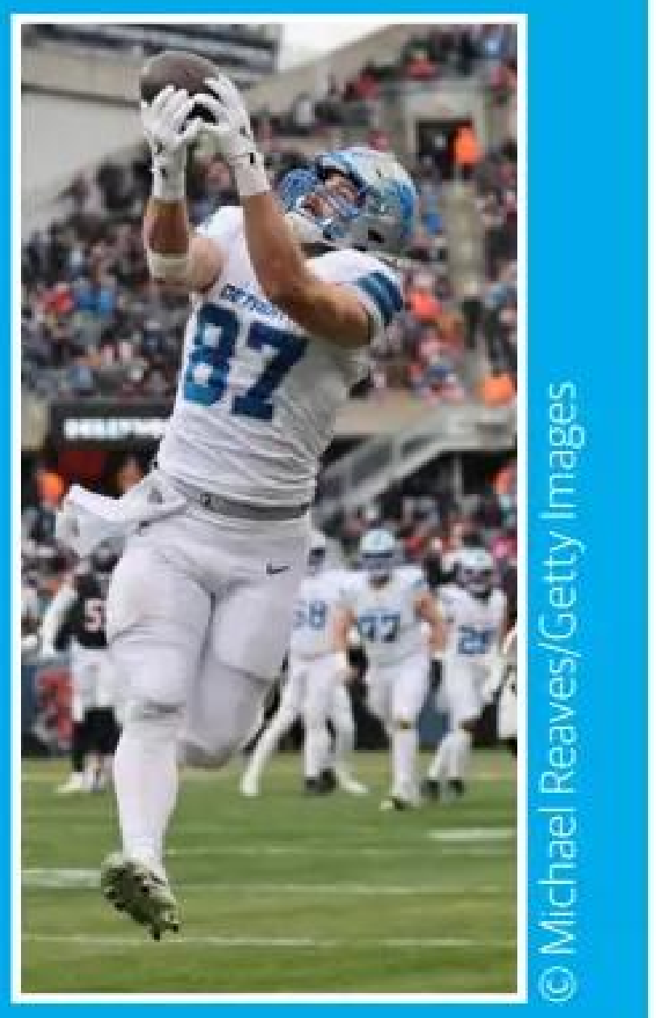
© Don Juan Moore/Getty Images

WELCOME TO THE CHEAP SEATS

★ One of the most shocking plays of the season took place when Trevor Lawrence scrambled for yardage against the Texans in week 13. At the end of the play he slid to the turf… only to take a vicious cheap shot from Azeez Al-Shaair. All hell broke loose on the field as Jaguars went hunting for payback. Lawrence missed the rest of the season.

THE STUMBLE BUM

★ Detroit unveiled some trickeration when they called the 'Stumble Bum' play against Chicago in week 16. Jared Goff pretended to stumble and then fumble, with Jahmyr Gibbs joining in on the deception by pretending to fall on a loose ball. As the Bears were distracted, Goff recovered his balance and lofted a 21-yard scoring pass to Sam LaPorta.



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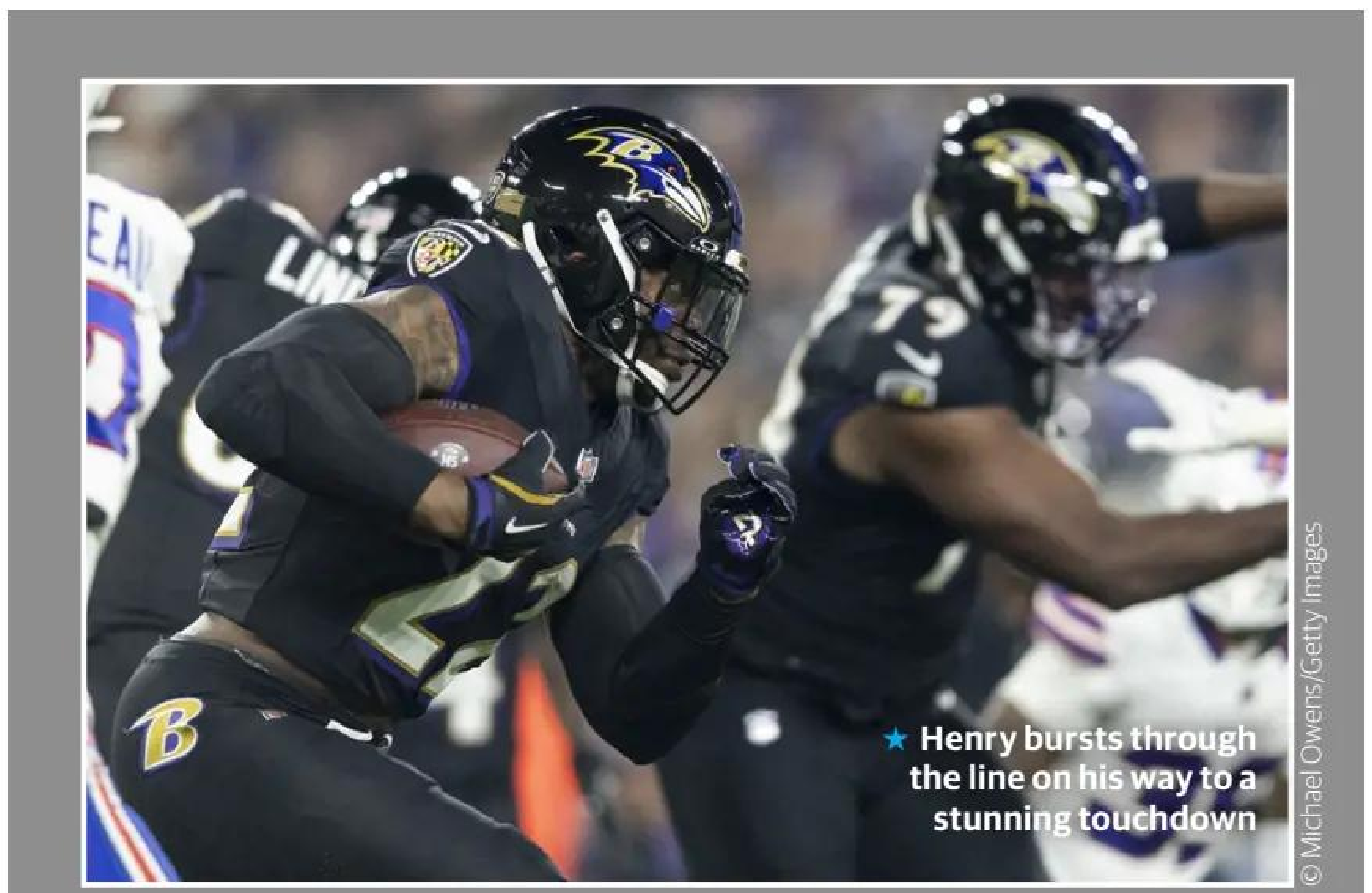


★ Henry bursts through the line on his way to a stunning touchdown

© Michael Owens/Getty Images

FIRST IMPRESSIONS COUNT

★ When your first drive of the day lasts just 12 seconds, it usually means something bad has happened. The opposite was true when Derrick Henry took the handoff on the Ravens' first play from scrimmage against Buffalo in week four… 87 yards later he was coasting into the Bills' end zone having cut their defense to shreds.

© Ronald Martinez/Getty Images

BARKLEY'S DOUBLE WHAMMY

★ Chris Collinsworth had a sense something big was coming in the Eagles' week 12 matchup with the Rams, saying that it looked like Barkley was about to break off a big run. At the start of the third quarter he obliged with a 70-yard scoring run and then added another from 72 yards. "What a night, what a season, what a player," said announcer Mike Tirico.

Jalen Hurts passed for 221 yards on his way to the MVP award

SUPER BOWL LIX

EAGLES 40 - 22 CHIEFS

It's not often that a team does exactly what it wants to do in a Super Bowl and still ends up getting trounced. The Chiefs came into Super Bowl LIX with one goal – to stop Saquon Barkley from beating them.

They did exactly that, bottling up the Eagles' main threat brilliantly. And it's not as if the Eagles did not try to establish their running game – Barkley had six rushing attempts in both the first and second quarters.

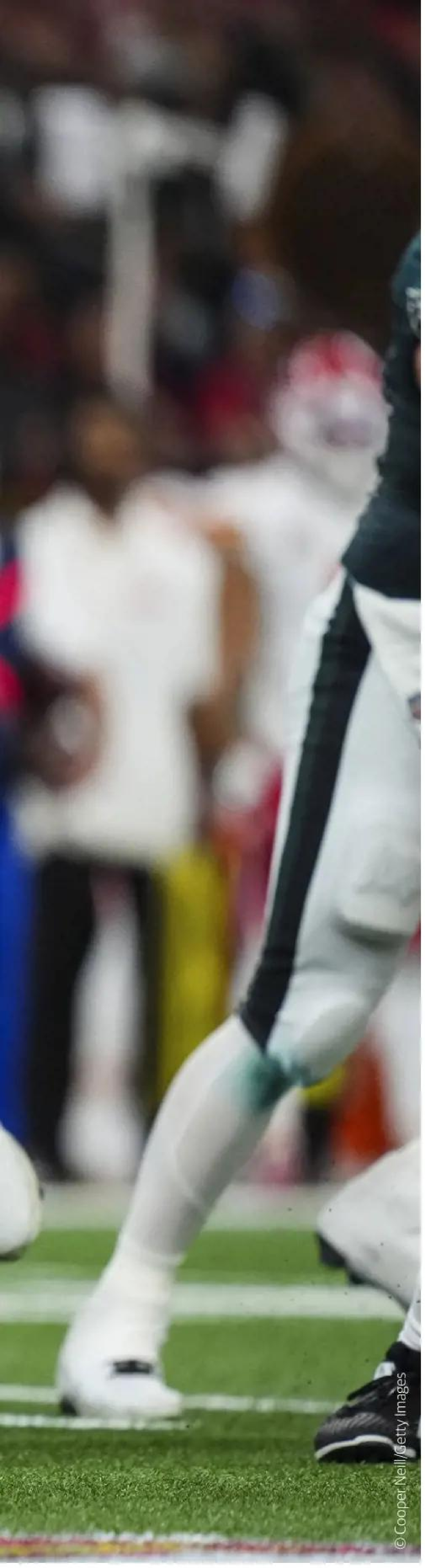
At halftime, the Chiefs' game plan was working perfectly. Barkley had been held to 31 yards on his 12 carries… but the game was over. The reasons behind this were varied, but they all had a familiar element. The Eagles were a better team in almost every department.

Kansas City believed that if they kept a lid on Barkley, they could keep the game close, and they excel in close contests. Of their 17 wins in the 2024 season, 12 came in one-score games, but despite containing Barkley, they could not stay in touch.

In the first half of the game, Philadelphia's domination was almost total. They had 13 first downs to the Chiefs' one. They held possession for just one second short of 20 minutes, averaged 4.6 yards per play as opposed to 1.2 yards, and piled up 179 yards of offense compared to 23. The most damning statistic of all was up on the scoreboard as the teams trotted off for the long halftime interval: 24-0.

The Eagles scored on their second possession, two big passes from Jalen Hurts setting them up at the Chiefs' one-yard line. Kansas City had done a good job of stifling the Eagles' ground game, but they had no answer for the 'Brotherly Shove', and Hurts was duly driven over the goal line for the opening score.

Chiefs defensive tackle Chris Jones would later be seen on the sidelines having his neck massaged as he felt the effects of trying to stop Philadelphia's massive offensive line. That line, the tallest and


© Cooper Neill/Getty Images

heaviest in Super Bowl history (averaging 6'6" and 338 pounds) was likely to wear defenders down as the game went on, and it was critical for the Chiefs not to fall further behind. Bryan Cook gave them a chance, intercepting Hurts when the Eagles were driving for another score, but the drive came to nothing and Philly was soon adding a 48-yard Jake Elliott field goal.

Before the Chiefs could gather themselves, disaster struck. Mahomes was intercepted by Cooper DeJean, who celebrated his birthday (he was only the second player in history to appear in an NFL Championship Game on his birthday) by returning the ball 38 yards for another score.

The Chiefs were not just behind, they were discombobulated. Travis Kelce looked numb, having failed to bring in any of his three targets. Players exhorted each other on the sideline to stay calm, and Mahomes could be seen replying, "I got it", repeatedly.

He didn't have it, throwing another interception on his very next pass. Two plays later, Hurts hit AJ Brown for the back-breaking score and a 24-0 halftime lead.

Everyone but the most diehard Chiefs fan knew the game was over. Another Elliott field goal for the Eagles in the third quarter, followed by a 46-yard strike from Hurts to DeVonta Smith, pushed the score to 34-0. The flurry of Chiefs scores that followed (two touchdown passes to Xavier Worthy and one to DeAndre Hopkins) were meaningless. The Eagles had gained revenge for their defeat to the Chiefs two years earlier, and it hadn't been close.

MAHOMES FEELS THE HEAT

★A run of five passing plays from the usually lethal Kansas City offense served notice that this was not going to be their day. After Jake Elliott's field goal had made it 10-0, Patrick Mahomes was sacked by Josh Sweat, losing four yards. Then he lost another two yards after Sweat took him down again in combination with Jalyx Hunt. Cooper DeJean scored on an interception return on the following play, and the next time Mahomes dropped back to pass he was sacked a third time, this time by Milton Williams. On his next passing attempt, he was intercepted by Zack Baun.

Over a span of almost seven minutes, Mahomes had dropped back to pass five times. The result was three sacks and two interceptions, including a pick six. Game over.

© Getty Images

★ Josh Sweat corrals Patrick Mahomes for the first sack of the game

★ DeAndre Hopkins hauls in a consolation score in the second half

© Kevin Sabitus/Getty Images

★ Jalen Hurts is pushed into the end zone to open the scoring

© Kevin Sabitus/Getty Images

50 ICONIC NFL PLAYERS

Discover some of the most influential players to ever grace the National Football League and exactly what it was that made them so special

To succeed in a gruelling sport like football requires a fistful of traits that can't be coached. Athletic ability and/or a frame that can stop a locomotive in its tracks are a given, but beyond that the sport requires guile, mental strength and the ability to get inside the head of your opponents and mess with their minds. Needless to say, the sport has thrown up many great players over the years that have these skills in abundance, and here we showcase some of the greatest individuals to ever grace the gridiron field.

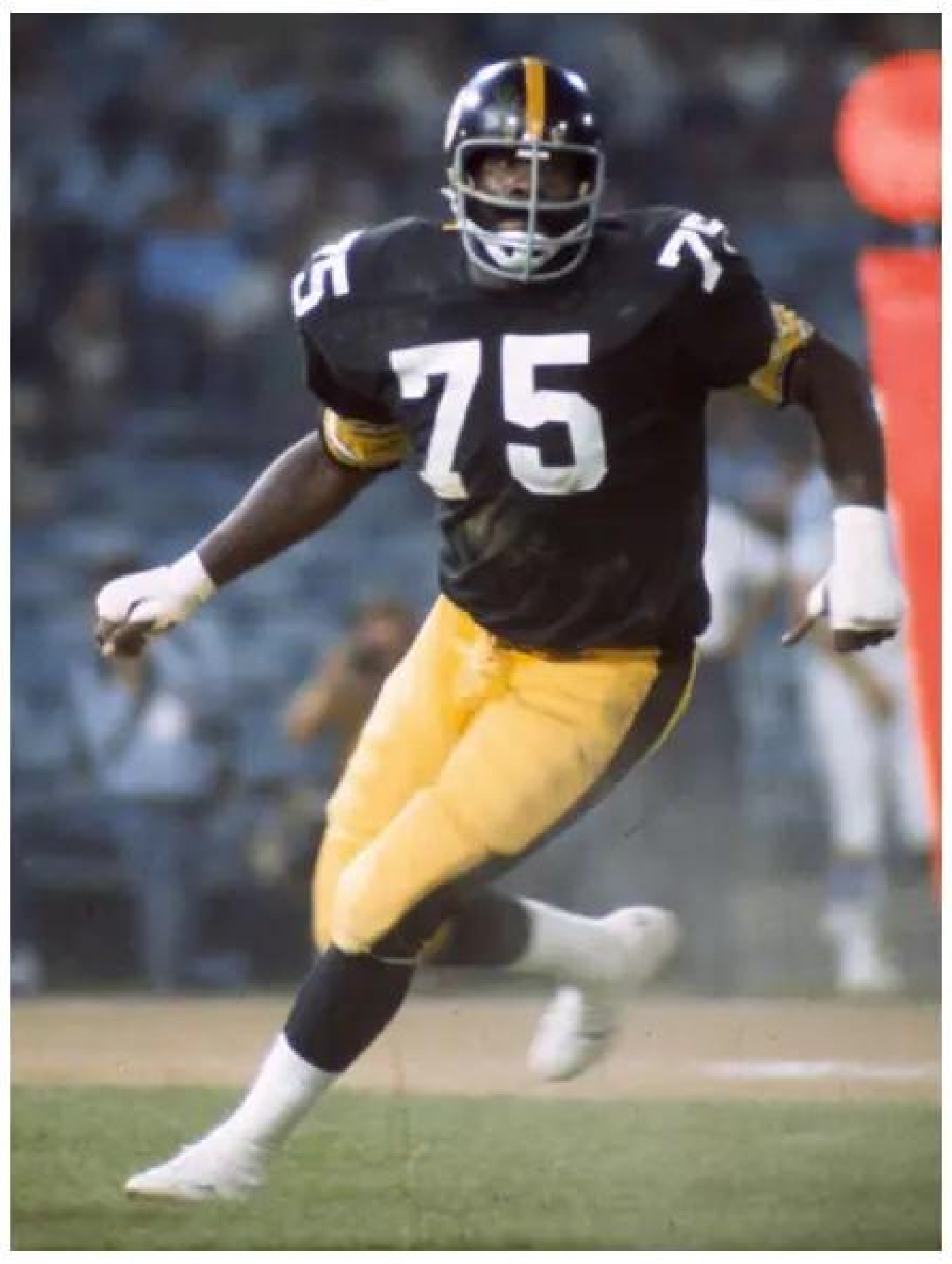
From laser-guided ball throwers to rapier-like runners, immovable linebackers to unflappable receivers, there is no shortage of legends to take up any position on the pitch. And while there are hundreds, maybe even thousands of players worthy of a place in this list, we have tried to present a wide range of candidates, some of whom were incredible at what they did, and others who had the oversized personalities to match their status on the pitch. So, from the players employed to win games to those there to prevent the opposition from doing so, whatever the cost, here is our list of 50 of the NFL's most iconic players.

JOHNNY UNITAS

01 Spending the majority of his career with the Baltimore Colts, quarterback Johnny Unitas was voted the NFL's most valuable player in 1957, 1959, 1964 and 1967. For decades he held the record for the most consecutive games with a touchdown pass, which he set between 1956 and 1960, before he was finally surpassed by Drew Brees in 2012.

★ Quarterback Johnny Unitas spent the majority of his career with the Baltimore Colts

JOE GREENE



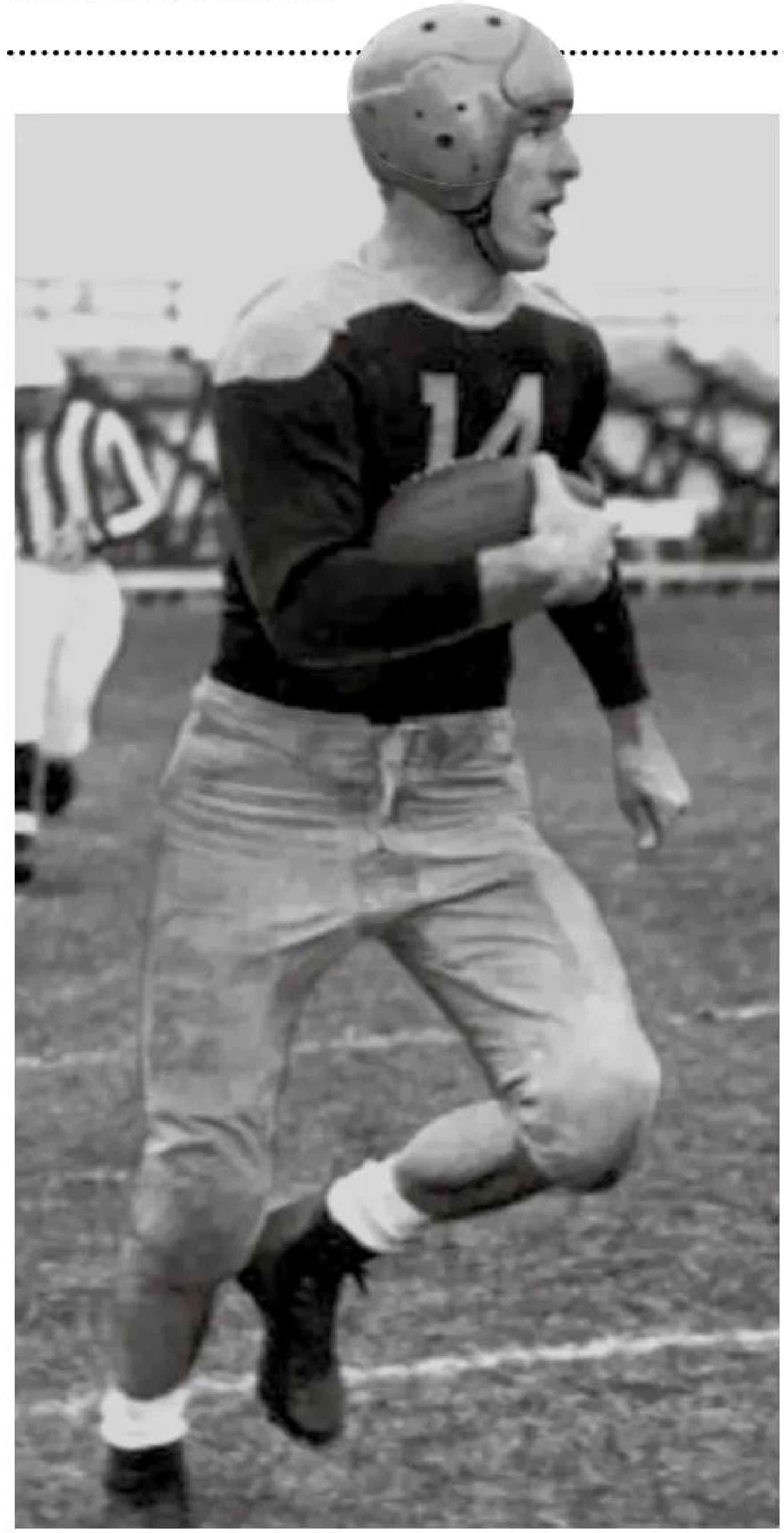
04 Greene played defensive tackle for the Pittsburgh Steelers throughout the early 1970s and was known as 'Mean Joe' Greene because of his no-nonsense approach to defending. Never afraid to steamroll his opponents, Greene was the winner of two NFL Defensive Player of the Year awards and the recipient of five first team All-Pro selections. He also won the Super Bowl four times in one of the most distinguished NFL careers of all time.

DARRELL GREEN

02 Considered to be one of the best cornerbacks to play in the NFL, Darrell Green spent his entire playing career (from 1983 to 2002) with the Washington Redskins and was famed for his considerable speed. Nicknamed the 'Ageless Wonder' by his peers for his energetic performances on the pitch well into the twilight of his career, Green was a two-time Super Bowl Champion (XXII and XXVI).

RONNIE LOTT

03 During his 14 seasons in the NFL (from 1981 to 1995), Ronnie Lott played cornerback, free safety and strong safety for the San Francisco 49ers, Los Angeles Raiders, New York Jets and the Kansas City Chiefs and was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 2000. Widely considered to be one of the best safeties of all time, Lott recorded 85 sacks and 63 interceptions during his NFL career, which he returned for 730 yards and five touchdowns.



DON HUTSON

05 Spending 11 seasons with the Green Bay Packers from 1935 to 1945, Don Hutson was considered the game's first modern receiver and is credited with creating many of the pass routes that are still used in the NFL today. Back in his day, Hutson held all of the major records associated with wide receivers, including career receptions, yards and touchdowns, and although he played before the advent of the Super Bowl, he triumphed three times in the NFL Championship game that preceded it.

EMMITT SMITH

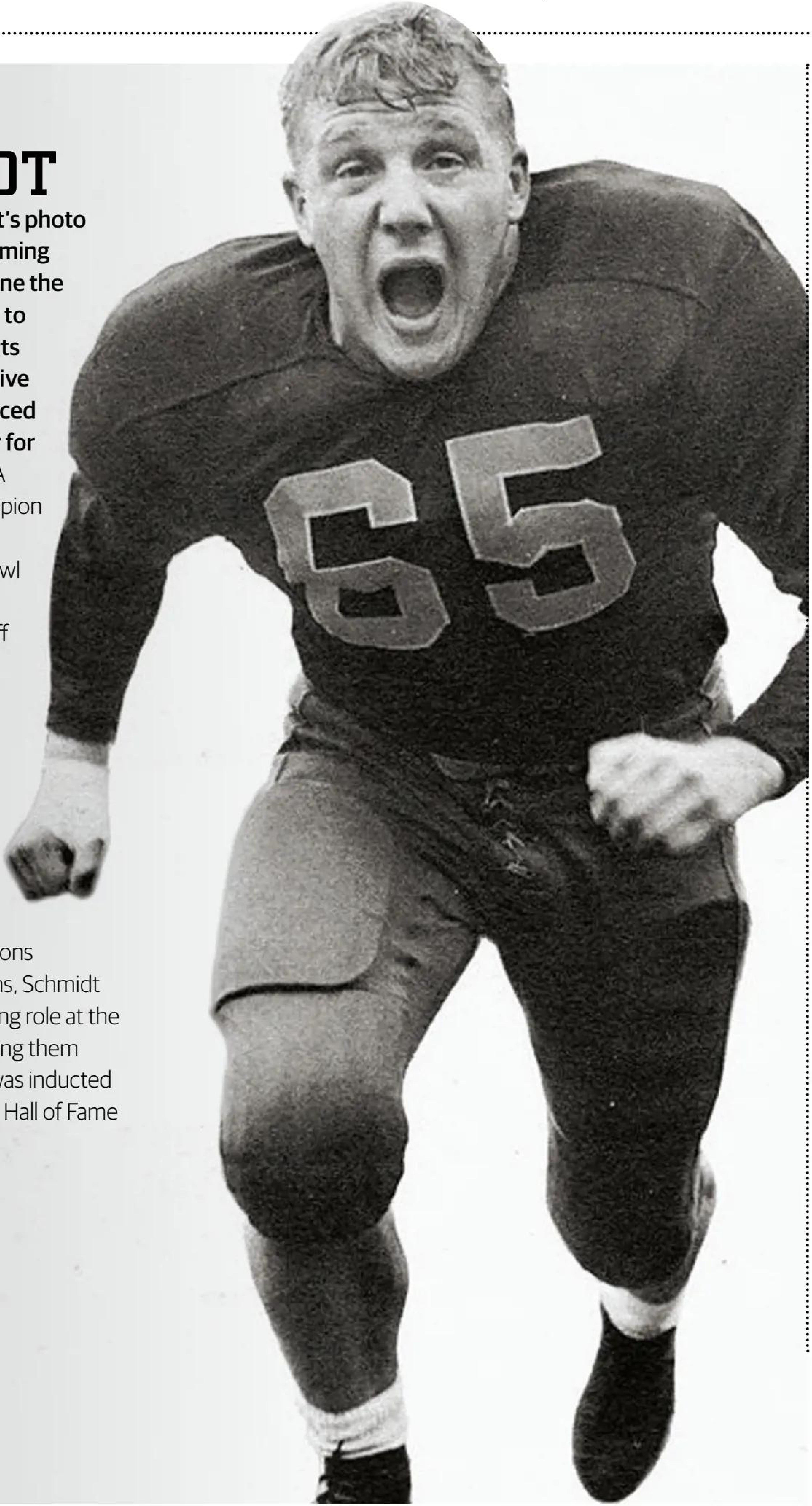
06 **Spending the majority of his 15 seasons in the NFL with the Dallas Cowboys, running back Emmitt Smith became the league's all-time rushing leader with a total of 18,355 yards from 4,409 carries, breaking the previous record set by Walter Payton.** Part of three Super Bowl-winning Cowboys teams, Smith also holds the unprecedented honour of being the only running back to win a Super Bowl championship, the NFL MVP, the NFL rushing crown and the Super Bowl MVP award in the same season (1993). In total he led the league in rushing and won the Super Bowl in the same year on three occassions (also in 1992 and 1995) and is one of only two non-kickers to score more than 1,000 NFL career points.

TERRY BRADSHAW

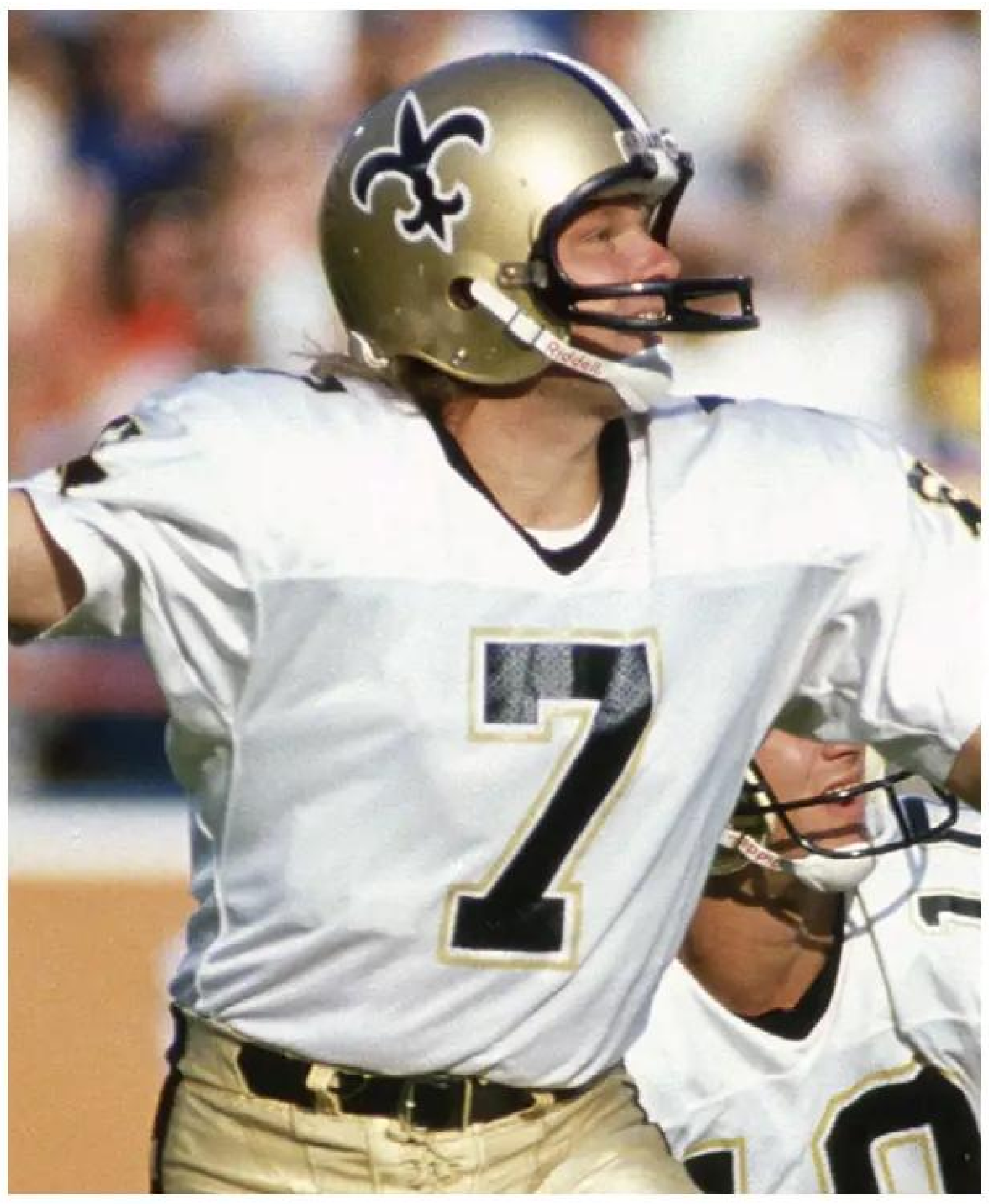
07 **A veteran of 14 seasons for the Pittsburgh Steelers, Terry Bradshaw was the first quarterback to win three (1974, 1975 and 1978) and then four (1979) Super Bowls and led the Steelers to eight AFC Central championships.** Robust, and with an arm that could launch a satellite into outer space, Bradshaw retired in 1983 with a record of 2,025 pass completions from 3,901 attempts, including 212 touchdown passes. Although that record equates to just a 51.9 per cent completion rating, it was Bradshaw's all-round performances, including his leadership on the field, that made him a Steelers legend. After football he got into acting and made several cameo appearances in films like *Smokey And The Bandit II.*

JOE SCHMIDT

08 **If Schmidt's photo looks alarming enough then imagine the terror that he used to strike into the hearts of opposing offensive players when he faced them as linebacker for the Detroit Lions.** A two-time NFL Champion (in 1953 and 1957) before the Super Bowl existed, Schmidt's toughness on and off the field meant that he bounced back quickly from injuries and his stopping abilities were recognised with ten Pro Bowl inclusions. When he retired in 1965, having spent 13 seasons playing with the Lions, Schmidt moved into a coaching role at the Lions before managing them two years later. He was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1973.



★ Schmidt's achievements as both a player and a coach make him a Lions legend



MORTEN ANDERSEN

09 **Born in Copenhagen (and so nicknamed 'The Great Dane'), Morten Andersen holds the record for the most games played in the NFL (382) and is second in the list of all-time leading scorers in NFL history.** Not only that, but he's also the all-time leading scorer for the New Orleans Saints and the second leading scorer for the Atlanta Falcons. First visiting the United States in 1977 as an exchange student, he so impressed as kicker for the Ben Davis High School team in Indianapolis that he was given a scholarship to Michigan State University. Famed for his bare-foot kicking style, Andersen kicked an outstanding 302 field goals for the Saints, including a 60-yarder against Chicago in 1991. He joined the Falcons in 1994 and became the first player to kick three field goals from over 50 yards in a game.

★ Offensive linesman Larry Allen was one of the strongest men to appear in the NFL

LARRY ALLEN

10 Regarded as one of the strongest men to have ever played professional football in the NFL (he recorded an official bench press of 705lbs and a squat of 905lbs), Larry Allen worked tirelessly as a guard for the Dallas Cowboys (1994-2005) and the San Francisco 49ers (2006-07). Recognised as one of the NFL's all-time greatest offensive linemen, Allen's physical might meant that he was able to play in most of the offensive line positions during his career. At various times, he played right tackle, right guard, left tackle and left guard, and he was also a victor at Super Bowl XXX when his Cowboys team triumphed over the Pittsburgh Steelers.

Having spent 12 seasons with the Cowboys, Allen played his final two with the 49ers before returning to sign a one-day contract with Dallas so that he could retire with the team that drafted him.

WALTER PAYTON

11 Running back Walter Payton started his professional NFL career with the Chicago Bears in 1975 and remained at Soldier Field for 13 seasons. During that time, Payton held records for the most career rushing yards, touchdowns, carries, yards from scrimmage and more. He helped the Bears win Super Bowl XX against the New England Patriots in 1985 and also proceeded to pick up two NFL MVP awards in a career in which he amassed over 16,726 rushing yards. Payton's motto was 'Never Die Easy', which he put into practice during matches by not making it easy for his tacklers by deliberately running out of bounds before being tackled. He retired in 1987 and passed away in 1999.

★ Blink and you'll miss him: Eric Dickerson on yet another surging run…

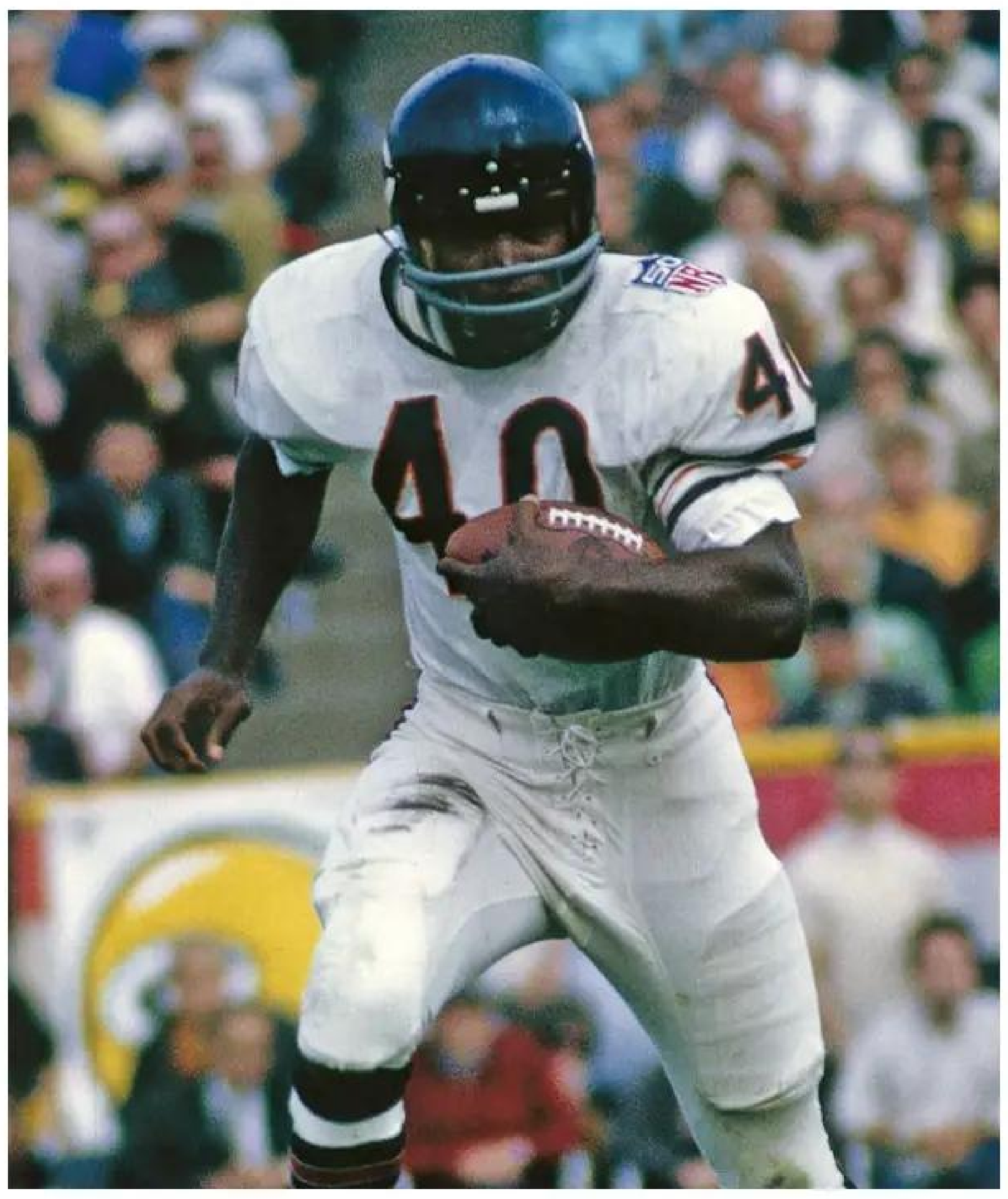
ERIC DICKERSON

12 Spending 11 seasons in the NFL during the 1980s and 1990s as a running back, mainly for the Los Angeles Rams (but also with stints at the Indianapolis Colts, LA Raiders and Atlanta Falcons), Eric Dickerson holds the record for rushing in a single season with 2,105 yards, which he set in 1984.

After bursting onto the scene in 1983, Dickerson was the NFL rushing yards leader in his rookie season (in which he also picked up the NFL MVP and Rookie of the Year awards) and also in 1984, 1986 and 1988. Unsurprisingly, his running exploits led to him being selected for six Pro Bowl appearances and making five All-Pro first teams during this purple patch. Throughout the course of his career, Dickerson amassed a total of 13,259 rushing yards, scoring 90 touchdowns in the process. The only thing lacking from his playing resumé is a Super Bowl winner's ring. As his career wound down, Dickerson appeared for other NFL teams, but he will mostly be remembered with the horns of the LA Rams emblazoned on the side of his helmet as he charged down the field.

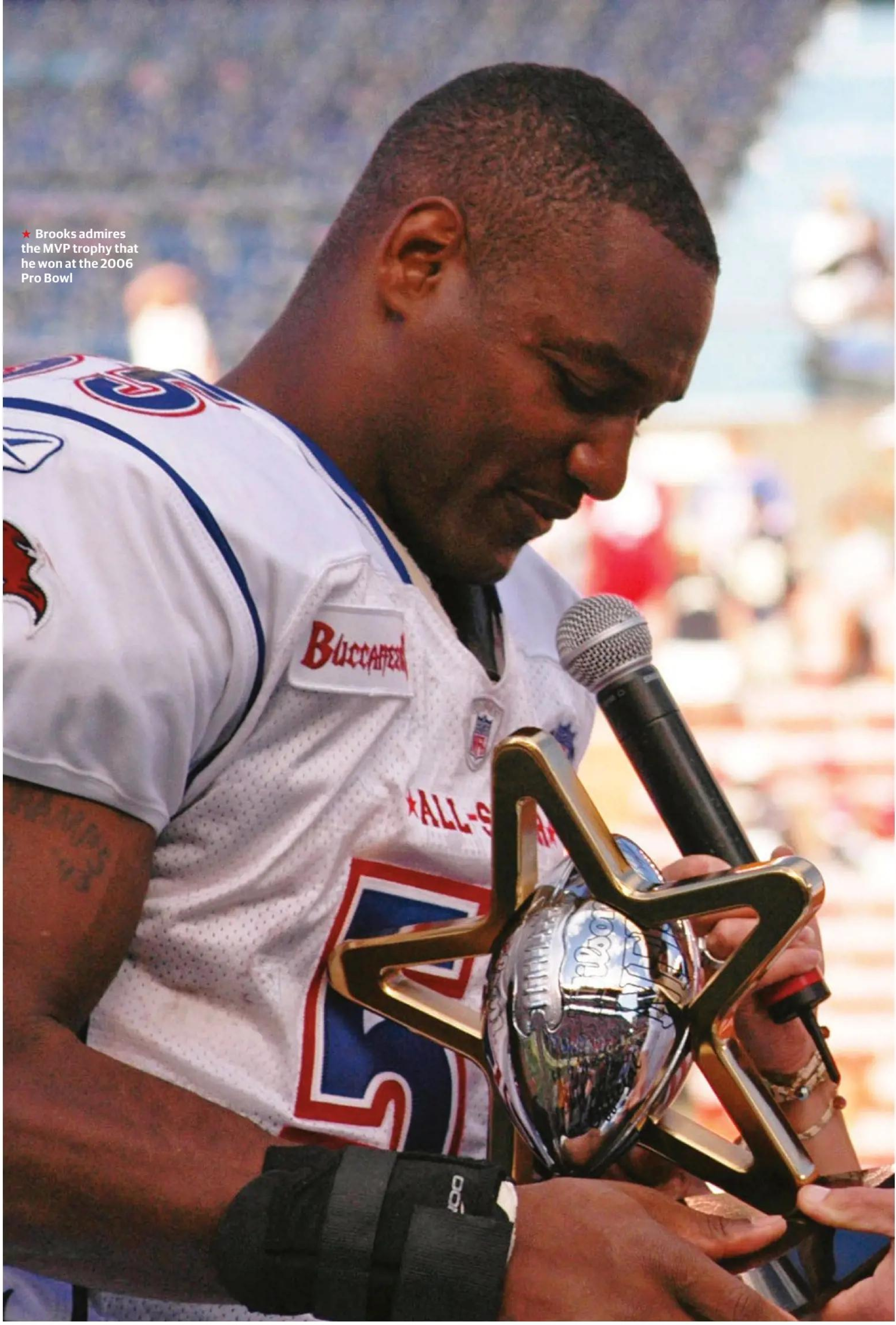
GALE SAYERS

13 Known in his playing days as 'The Kansas Comet', Gale Sayers spent seven seasons in the NFL as running back for the Chicago Bears during the 1960s and 1970s. A member of the College Football Hall of Fame after his outstanding performances for the University of Kansas, Sayers was also inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1977, and is still the youngest person to be inducted in the Hall's history. During his career, Sayers set records for the most touchdowns in a rookie season (22 in 1965), the most touchdowns scored in a single game (six), the highest career kickoff return average (30.56) and the most return touchdowns in a game (two). After retiring from the game, Sayers became a successful entrepreneur in information technology.



MARCUS ALLEN

14 Allen was a mercurial talent on the gridiron field and played mainly as a running back for the Los Angeles Raiders (from 1982 to 1992) and the Kansas City Chiefs (from 1993 to 1997). Considered one of the best goal line and short-yard runners in NFL history, Allen rushed for a total of 12,243 yards over his career, caught 587 passes for a total of 5,412 yards and scored 145 touchdowns. He was also pretty handy at passing, completing 12 of 27 passes for 285 yards and six touchdowns. Allen won one Super Bowl (XVIII) in 1983.

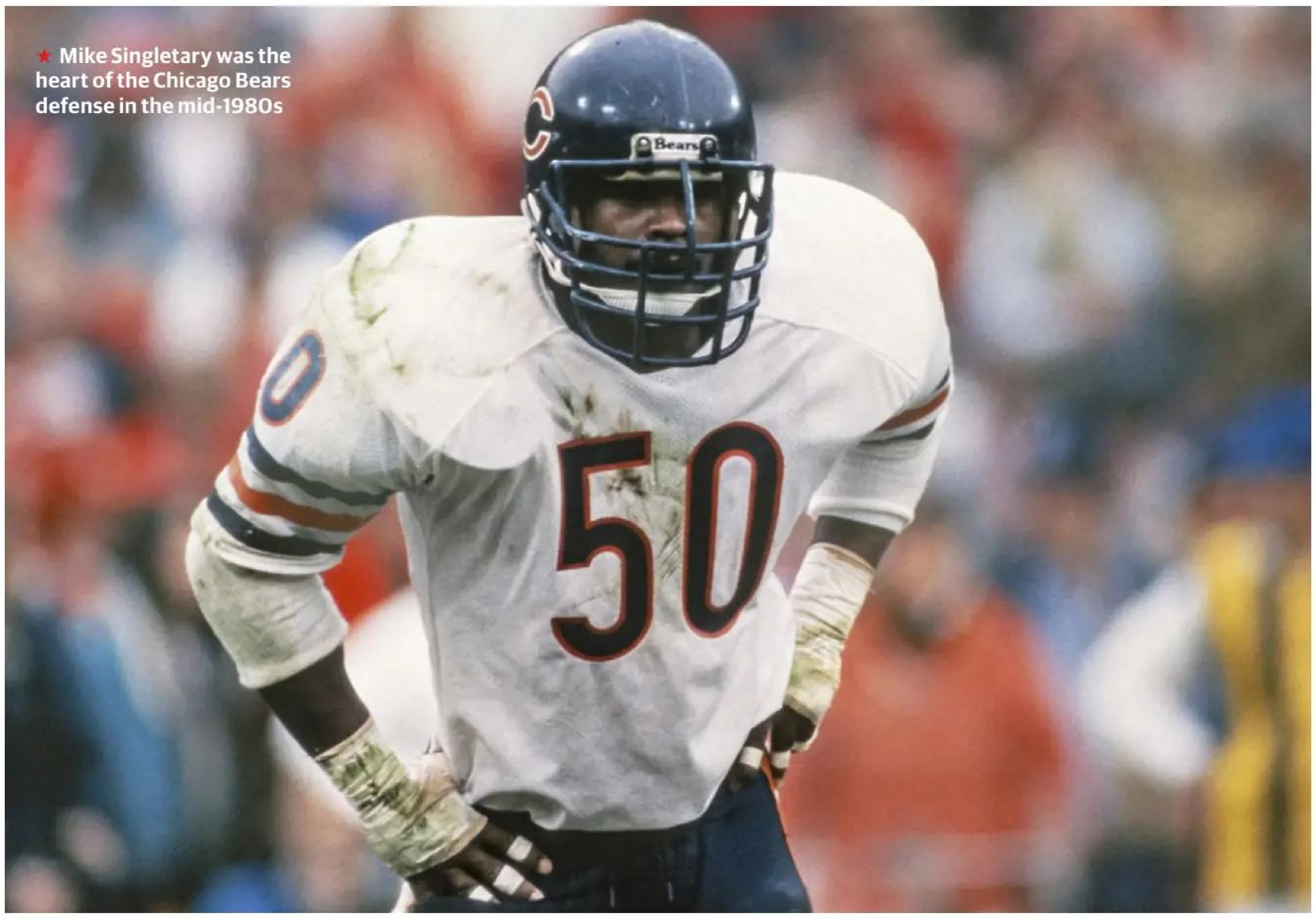


★ Brooks admires the MVP trophy that he won at the 2006 Pro Bowl

DERRICK BROOKS

15 After playing for Florida State University, linebacker Derrick Brooks was drafted by the Tampa Bay Buccaneers in the first round of the 1995 draft and went on to spend his entire 14-season professional career there. During his time with the Buccaneers, Brooks made 1,715 tackles, made 13.5 quarterback sacks and 25 interceptions. He also pitched in on the scoresheet on occasion by scoring seven touchdowns – a respectable return for someone employed to stop the other team from scoring.

His immoveability as a linebacker meant that Brooks was selected for the Pro Bowl 11 times and voted as an All-Pro (one of the best players in his position as voted for by sports writers) on nine occasions. He was also named All-Pro NFL Defensive Player of the Year in 2002 and helped the Buccaneers win Super Bowl XXXVII in 2003 when they defeated the Oakland Raiders. Brooks retired from playing in 2008.



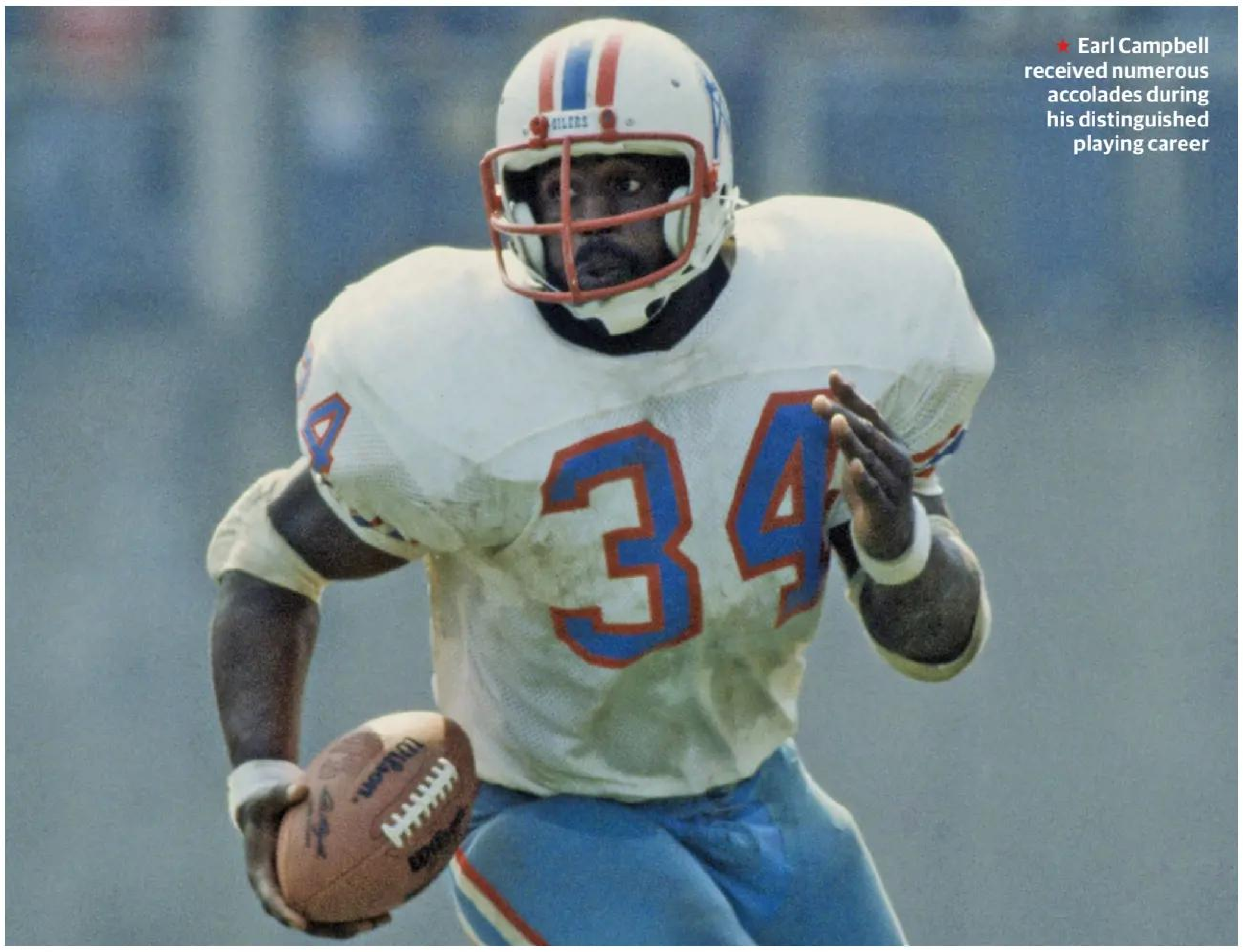
★ Mike Singletary was the heart of the Chicago Bears defense in the mid-1980s

MIKE SINGLETARY

16 **So integral was Mike Singletary to the defensive line of the famous Super Bowl-winning Chicago Bears side of the mid-1980s that he was actually nicknamed 'The Heart of the Defense'.** Singletary remained with the Bears throughout his entire playing career (from 1981 to 1992) and racked up a phenomenal 1,488 crunching tackles, 19 crucial quarterback sacks and seven interceptions. Inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1999, Singletary moved into coaching after retiring from playing and was linebacker coach for the Baltimore Ravens and San Francisco 49ers before getting the main coaching gig at the latter. Unfortunately, he was then relieved of his position with one game remaining of the 2010 season. He still coaches today, and presumably never has to buy his own drinks in Chicago.

JOE NAMATH

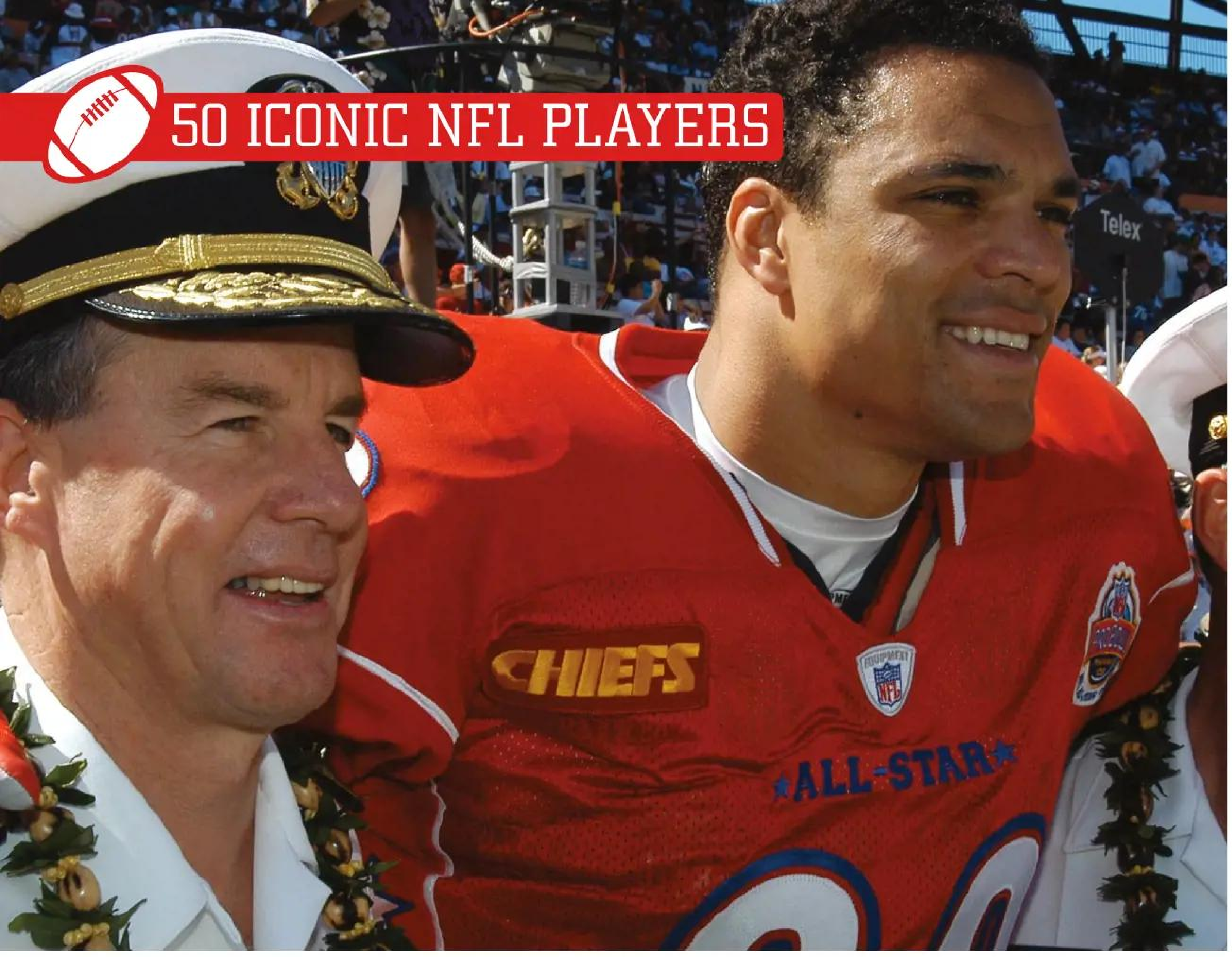
17 **Quarterback Namath began his professional NFL career with the New York Jets in 1965 and spent 11 seasons with them before finishing off his playing days with one season at the Los Angeles Rams.** A victor in Super Bowl III, Namath threw 173 touchdowns and completed 1,886 passes for 27,663 yards during his career. While these stats aren't exceptional, he was still inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame and, during his playing days, Namath became the NFL's first real media superstar, something that would serve him well after he retired from pro football and moved into acting. He has appeared in numerous TV shows since the late 1970s, and is one of many sports stars immortalised in *The Simpsons*.



★ Earl Campbell received numerous accolades during his distinguished playing career

EARL CAMPBELL

18 **Earl Campbell was the running back with the Houston Oilers who exploded onto the scene in 1978 when he led the NFL in rushing in each of his first three seasons – becoming the only player ever to do so.** In his third season in the NFL, Campbell rushed for over 200 yards in four separate games, which is a record that still stands today. Staying with the Oilers until 1984, he had one season with the New Orleans Saints before retiring in 1985. His considerable talent couldn't yield a Super Bowl winner's ring, but he did appear in five Pro Bowls and received numerous other awards, including the NFL Most Valuable Player (three times), NFL Offensive Player of the Year (three times) and many more during a distinguished career.

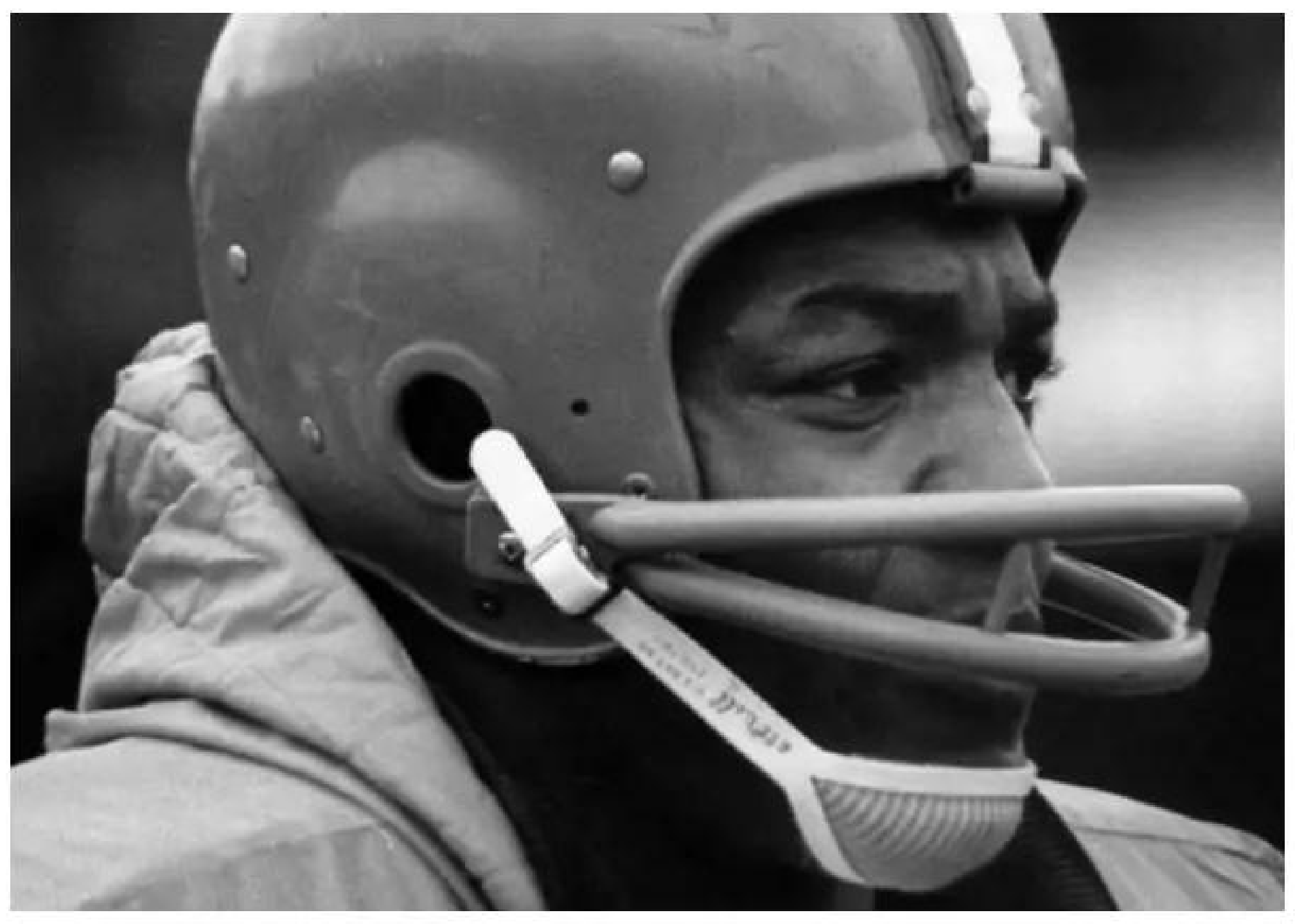


TONY GONZALEZ

19 **A durable tight end for the Kansas City Chiefs and the Atlanta Falcons, Tony Gonzalez only missed two games during his entire 17-year NFL career.** He also currently holds the NFL records for the most pass receptions (1,325), touchdown receptions (111) and total receiving yards (15,127) for a player in his position. In fact, following the start of the 2000 season, Gonzalez made 1,145 receptions with only one fumble, making him one of the safest pair of hands in NFL history. He was selected for 14 Pro Bowls and six All-Pro first teams during his career and after retiring from the game back in 2013 he made an effortless transition into football analysis and punditry, where he has worked for CBS, Fox and Amazon.

JIM BROWN

20 **This fullback fittingly spent his entire career with the Cleveland Browns, from 1957 to 1965.** Brown was the first player to reach the milestone of 100 rushing touchdowns and his record of 100 touchdowns scored in 93 games stood until 2006. He passed away in 2023.



JIM KELLY

21 **With his no-huddle, 'K-Gun' offensive style, quarterback Jim Kelly led the Buffalo Bills to a record four consecutive Super Bowls from 1991 to 1994.** Although they agonisingly lost all of them, Kelly was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 2002.

★ LaDainian Tomlinson (with his distinctive dark visor) in action for the San Diego Chargers

LADAINIAN TOMLINSON

22 **Identifiable from the dark visor he wore over the grid of his helmet to combat a sensitivity to light, LaDainian Tomlinson spent the majority of his 11-year NFL career as running back for the San Diego Chargers (from 2001-2009) before finishing at the New York Jets (2010-2011).** He amassed a total of 13,684 rushing yards, scoring 145 touchdowns with his standout season coming in 2006 when he set several touchdown scoring records and received numerous honours, including the NFL's Most Valuable Player award.

OZZIE NEWSOME

23 The consumate, one-team professional, Ozzie Newsome played tight end for the Cleveland Browns from 1978 until 1990, during which time he made 662 pass receptions for a total of 7,980 yards, scoring 47 touchdowns. Though he never won the Super Bowl as a player, he has been victorious on two occasions as general manager of the Baltimore Ravens (at Super Bowls XXXV and XLVII). Newsome was selected for the Pro Bowl on three occasions and also made the NFL 1980s All-Decade Team. He was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1999.

ART SHELL

24 As a no-nonsense offensive tackle for the Oakland/Los Angeles Raiders, Art Shell holds the distinction of becoming only the second-ever African-American head coach in the history of pro football when he took over the reigns of his beloved Raiders after hanging up his boots in 1983. As a player, Shell played in 24 playoff contests and was on the winning side at Super Bowls XI and XV.

His hard-hitting exploits on the field were rewarded with eight call-ups for the Pro Bowl and he also featured in the NFL 1970s All-Decade Team. After moving into coaching, Shell won the Super Bowl again as coach of the Raiders when he masterminded their obliteration of the Washington Redskins at Super Bowl XVIII. He was also named NFL Coach of the Year in 1990. After leaving the Raiders in 1995, Shell also coached the Atlanta Falcons for three seasons before returning to manage the Raiders again in 2006, although this time the outcome was far from pleasing for both parties – he led the team to its worst record (of two wins and 14 defeats) since 1963. Shell was elected to the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1989 and in 1999 he was ranked number 55 on The Sporting News' list of the 100 Greatest Football Players.

DAN MARINO

25 Despite never being on a Super Bowl-winning team, Dan Marino is still recognised as being one of the greatest quarterbacks in NFL history. Fondly remembered for his quick release and powerful throwing arm, he spent his entire playing career (from 1983 to 1999) with the Miami Dolphins. Marino was the NFL's leader in passing yards from 1984 to 1986 – and also in the 1988 and 1992 seasons – and the touchdown passing leader from 1984-1986. Synonymous with the number 13 jersey (which the Dolphins retired in his honour), Marino threw a then-NFL record of 48 touchdown passes in only his second season, when the Dolphins got all the way to, and lost, Super Bowl XIX.

With his laser-guided throwing ability, Dan Marino was a Dolphins legend

STEVE YOUNG

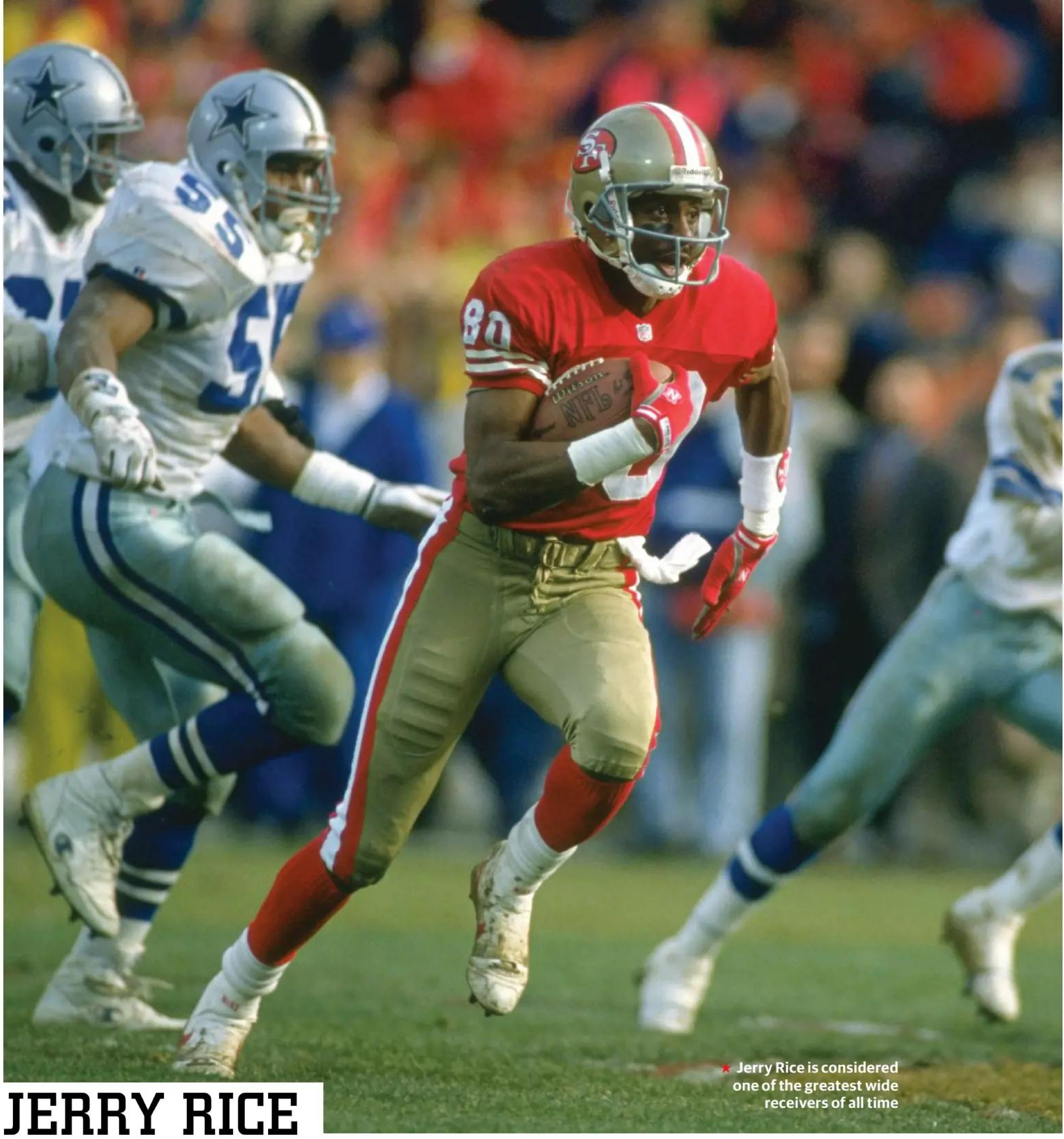
26 Young was a quarterback for the Tampa Bay Buccaneers and the 49ers. He won a record six NFL passer rating titles, and at the time of his retirement he had the highest passer rating in the NFL with 96.8 percent completion over 1,500 attempts.

MIKE DITKA

27 'Iron' Mike Ditka is one of the few people to win a Super Bowl as a player, assistant coach and head coach. He managed these feats during his time with the Dallas Cowboys and the Chicago Bears. Bringing new versatility to the tight end position, Ditka was a potent offensive player, as well as offering plenty of robust blocking.

WILLIAM PERRY

28 Perry was a bruising defensive lineman with the Bears and the Eagles. His size (standing 6ft2in tall and weighing 335lbs) earned him the nickname 'The Refrigerator' and he became one of the most recognisable faces (or builds) in the sport.



Jerry Rice is considered one of the greatest wide receivers of all time

JERRY RICE

29 Widely considered to be the greatest wide receiver in NFL history, Jerry Rice played an incredible 20 seasons in the league, mainly for the San Francisco 49ers, but also for the Oakland Raiders and the Seatle Seahawks. Retiring in 2004, Rice is still the all-time leader in most wide receiver-related statistics, including pass receptions (1,540), touchdown receptions (197) and receiving yards (22,895).

Rice was a Super Bowl winner on three occasions with the 49ers and, after stints at the Raiders and Seahawks, he declined an initial one-year contract from the Denver Broncos at the end of the 2004 season, instead signing a one-day contract with the 49ers to allow him to retire as a member of the team where he began his career. Rice played 303 games in total, missing only 17 regular season games in his 20 professional seasons and was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 2010 in his first year of eligibility. The 49ers have since retired the number 80 jersey in his honour.

TROY AIKMAN

30 Quarterback Troy Aikman spent his entire playing career (from 1989 to 2000) with the Dallas Cowboys, and during this illustrious period he was selected for the Pro Bowl six times and led his team to three Super Bowl victories. He was named MVP at Super Bowl XXVII when his Dallas team trounced the Buffalo Bills.

Aikman was at the peak of his powers in the early 1990s, and in 1992 he set career highs in pass completions (302), passing yards (3,445) and touchdown passes (23) while leading the Cowboys to a team-record 13 victories in the regular season – the second best record in the NFC.

A magnet for heavy hits, Aikman was seemingly regularly struck down with concussion (he claims to remember very little about his Super Bowl XXVIII victory) and he was rotated with former Philadelphia Eagles quarterback, Randall Cunningham. However, a persistent back injury eventually forced him to retire at the end of the 2000 season.

MICHAEL IRVIN

31 Nicknamed 'The Playmaker' due to his penchant for making big plays in big games, Michael Irvin was a wide receiver for the Dallas Cowboys from 1988 to 1999. Throughout a glittering playing career, Irvin won the Super Bowl three times (XXVII, XXVIII and XXX) and made 750 pass receptions over 11,904 yards, while also scoring 65 touchdowns. His career was ended during a game against the Philadelphia Eagles when he landed headfirst into the turf and suffered a serious spinal injury. Since retiring he has carved out a career in the sports media and has also appeared in several films, such as the 2005 remake of *The Longest Yard* starring Adam Sandler.

★ Family ties: Bruce Matthews (left) with his brother Clay

BRUCE MATTHEWS

32 An offensive tackle for the NFL's Oilers/Titans franchise, Bruce Matthews played offensive tackle for 19 seasons from 1983 to 2001 and comes from a football dynasty. His father, Clay Matthews Sr played in the NFL in the 1950s, and his brother, Clay Matthews Jr, played in the NFL for the Cleveland Browns at the same time as Bruce. What's more, Bruce is the uncle of the Green Bay Packers linebacker Clay Matthews III, Minnesota Vikings linebacker Casey Matthews and even his sons now play professional football for various teams – it must be in the blood. During his own career, Bruce was selected for 14 Pro Bowls, was included in the NFL's All-Decade team for the 1990s and had the honour of having his number 74 jersey retired by the Tennessee Titans when he stopped playing.

★ Running Back Tony Dorsett displayed plenty of fancy footwork on the field

TONY DORSETT

33 A running back for the Dallas Cowboys and the Denver Broncos, Tony Dorsett's NFL career began in 1977. He would go on to become a legend with the Cowboys, winning the NFL Offensive Rookie of the Year award in his first season and racking up over 12,000 rushing yards in his 11 seasons with the franchise. One of his defining moments came in a game against the St Louis Cardinals in 1980 when, on the four-yard line, he displayed some unbelievably fancy footwork to elude five hapless defenders and carry the football into the end zone without being touched, resulting in one of his 92 career touchdowns.

FRAN TARKENTON

34 **In a career stretching from 1961 to 1978, Fran Tarkenton served as quarterback for the Minnesota Vikings and the New York Giants.** Picked by the Vikings in the third round of the 1961 NFL Draft, in his first game Tarkenton came off the bench with his team trailing to the Chicago Bears and passed for 250 yards (including four touchdown passes) and rushed for a touchdown of his own to complete an unlikely comeback. He was the NFL's passing yards leader in 1978, made nine Pro Bowl appearances and picked up countless other awards in a career that ended with the Vikings retiring his number 10 jersey.

NORM VAN BROCKLIN

35 **Nicknamed 'The Dutchman', Norm Van Brocklin played as a quarterback (and occasional punter) for the Los Angeles Rams and the Philadelphia Eagles during the 1950s.** An accurate passer of the ball, Van Brocklin's career passing rating was 75.1, a stat that saw him selected for the Pro Bowl nine times and be awarded the NFL's MVP award in 1960. After retiring from playing, Van Brocklin moved into coaching and had stints coaching the Minnesota Vikings and Atlanta Falcons. He is fondly remembered as one of the game's more colourful personalities.

★ Ed Reed spent 11 seasons with the Baltimore Ravens making the lives of opposing quarterbacks a misery

ED REED

36 **Picked by the Baltimore Ravens in the first round of the 2002 draft, defensive back Ed Reed played there for 11 seasons before joining the Houston Texans and then the New York Jets.** He ultimately signed a one-day contract, as is quite common for legendary-status players, back at the Ravens to retire as a member of their squad. During his playing career, Reed made 643 tackles, 64 interceptions (returning them for a total of 1,590 yards – an all-time NFL record) and scored an incredible 13 touchdowns.

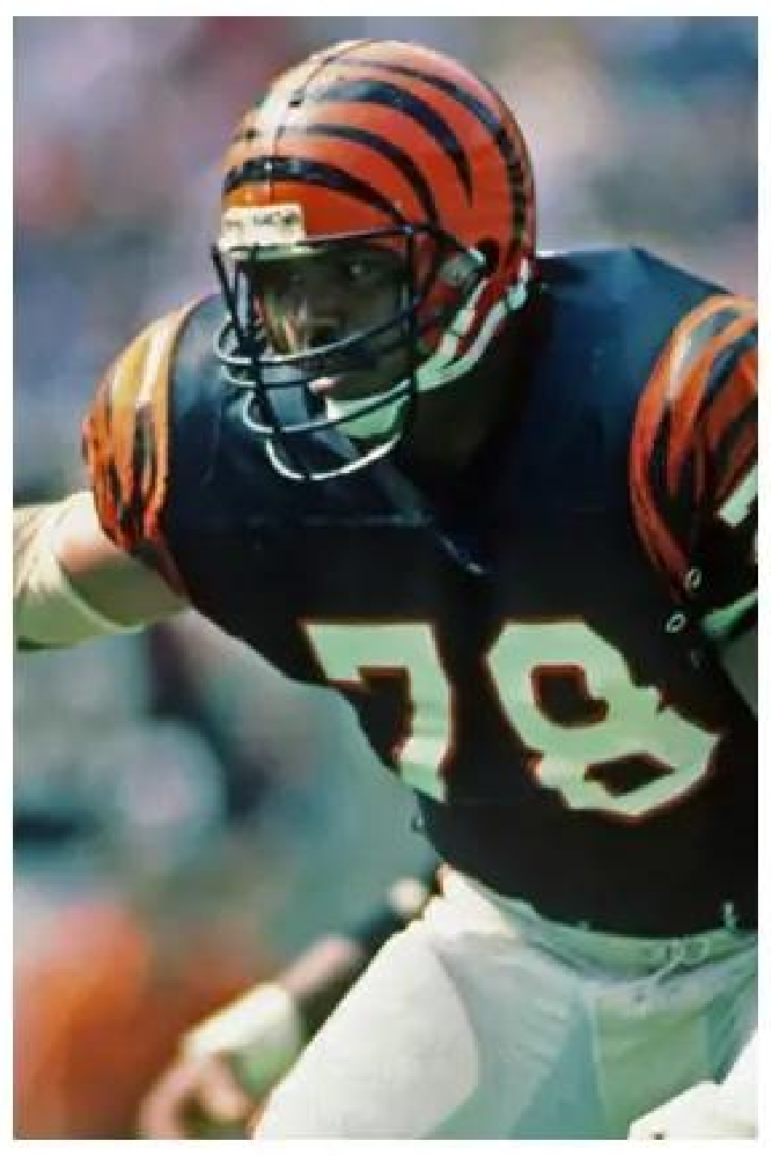
Reed was voted the NFL Defensive Player of the Year in 2004 and was selected in a total of nine Pro Bowls. Such was his professionalism that he was known to meticulously study films of his opposing teams to memorise their tendencies, and he was also noted for his ability to lure quarterbacks into making ill-judged passes that could be intercepted. After retiring from playing, Reed joined the Buffalo Bills as assistant defensive backs coach, where he is no doubt coaching a new generation of defensive linemen to read the game as well as himself.

ELROY HIRSCH

37 **Known affectionately as 'Crazylegs' on account of his unusual running style, Elroy Hirsch was a well-known running back and receiver for the Los Angeles Rams and Chicago Rockets.** Never heard of them? Well, this was back in the 1940s. Born in Wisconsin to German-Norwegian parents, Hirsch was drafted by the Rockets in 1946 and spent three injury-prone seasons in Chicago before moving to the Rams in 1949. It was in LA that Hirsch become famous, and he was one of the first players to wear the moulded plastic helmet that is now the industry standard. When playing for the Rockets, on one occasion he was tackled so severely that he tore his right knee ligaments and actually fractured his skull just above his right ear. So, when he eventually moved to the Rams, his coach fitted him for the helmet as a precaution.

Elroy Hirsch was pivotal to the Rams' 1951 NFL Championship-winning season with a record 1,495 yards receiving, which stood for the next 19 years, as well as 66 catches and 17 touchdowns in 12 games. He was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1968 having racked up 387 receptions for 7,029 yards and 60 touchdowns across his playing career. After retiring, Hirsch became the director of athletics at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, raising home attendance at their football games overnight.

ANTHONY MUÑOZ



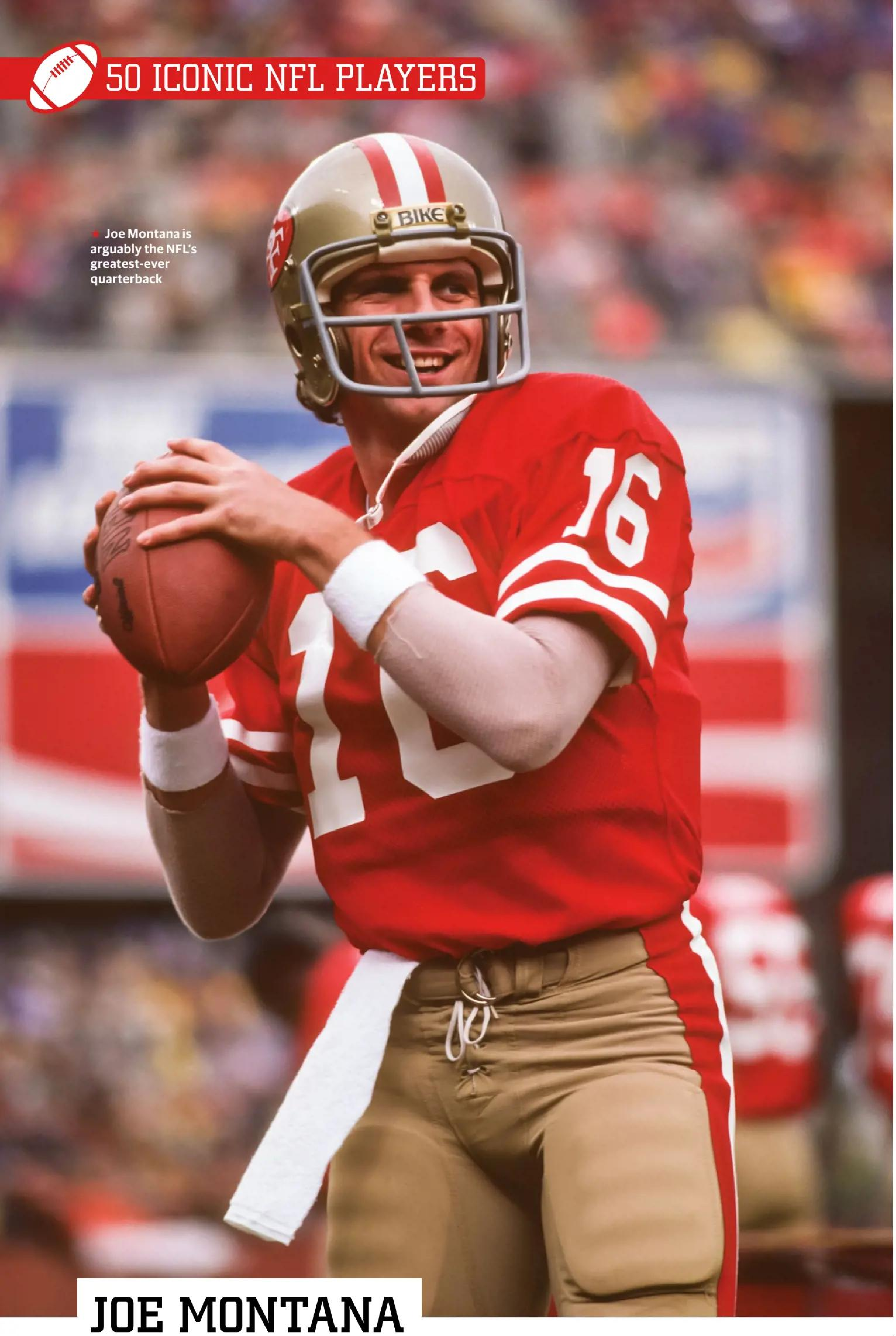
38 **Widely considered to be one of the NFL's greatest ever offensive linemen, Anthony Muñoz played 13 seasons for the Cincinnati Bengals from 1980 to 1992.** At the time of his retirement, Muñoz was tied with Tom Mack for the most ever Pro Bowl appearances by an offensive lineman and was the highest ranked lineman (at 17) when the *Sporting News* compiled its list of the 100 greatest football players. Muñoz also appeared in two motion pictures, one being 1983's *The Right Stuff*, which was nominated for an Academy Award.

★ Quarterback Peyton Manning was a five-time winner of the NFL MVP award

PEYTON MANNING

39 **Quarterback Peyton Manning played for an incredible 18 seasons in the NFL – 14 with the Indianapolis Colts and four with the Denver Broncos.** During that time he won the NFL MVP award five times and won the Super Bowl twice (once with each team). Coming from a rich dynasty of playmakers (his father was former Saints quarterback Archie Manning and his brother, Eli, was the quarterback for the New York Giants), Peyton Manning's career stats rank him up there with the very best to have played the game.

During his time with the Colts, Manning led them to eight division championships, two AFC championships and a Super Bowl championship (triumphing over the Chicago Bears at Super Bowl XLI). His five NFL MVP awards are a league record and he was named in 14 Pro Bowls, largely thanks to his 14 successful 4,000-yard passing seasons – which is also an NFL record. In winning Super Bowl 50 in his final game, Manning also became the first quarterback to achieve 200 career wins.



Joe Montana is arguably the NFL's greatest-ever quarterback

JOE MONTANA

40 Few NFL quarterbacks can boast as influential a record as Joe Montana. Starting his career with the San Francisco 49ers in 1979, Montana spent 14 seasons with the west-coast team, guiding them to four Super Bowl victories and becoming the first player to ever be named Super Bowl Most Valuable Player three times. He also holds Super Bowl career records for the most passes without an interception (122 in four games) and holds the all-time highest quarterback rating of 127.8. He was a constant performer who relished the big games and was noted for his calmness under pressure, leading to one of his two nicknames of 'Joe Cool'.

With his ice-cool demeanour, Montana also earned the second of his nicknames, 'The Comeback Kid' thanks to his ability to dig deep and fashion wins for his team by coming from behind in the fourth quarter of no less than 31 games throughout his career, most notably at Super Bowl XXIII. With his team trailing to the Cincinnati Bengals, Montana orchestrated an incredible 92-yard drive that resulted in the game-winning touchdown for the 49ers with only 36 seconds left on the clock. One of the true legends of the field.

ROB GRONKOWSKI

41 A physical monster on the field and a larger-than-life personality off it, 'Gronk' revolutionised the tight end position. A four-time Super Bowl champion who was a formidable defensive blocker as well as being perhaps the greatest receiver ever at the TE position, Gronkowski formed a deadly partnership with Tom Brady as part of the Patriots dynasty throughout the 2010s. After retiring in 2019, he partnered with Brady again in Tampa Bay, and duly won his fourth ring, catching two TDs in the Super Bowl and becoming the first player to catch a pass in five editions of the showpiece game.

LAWRENCE TAYLOR

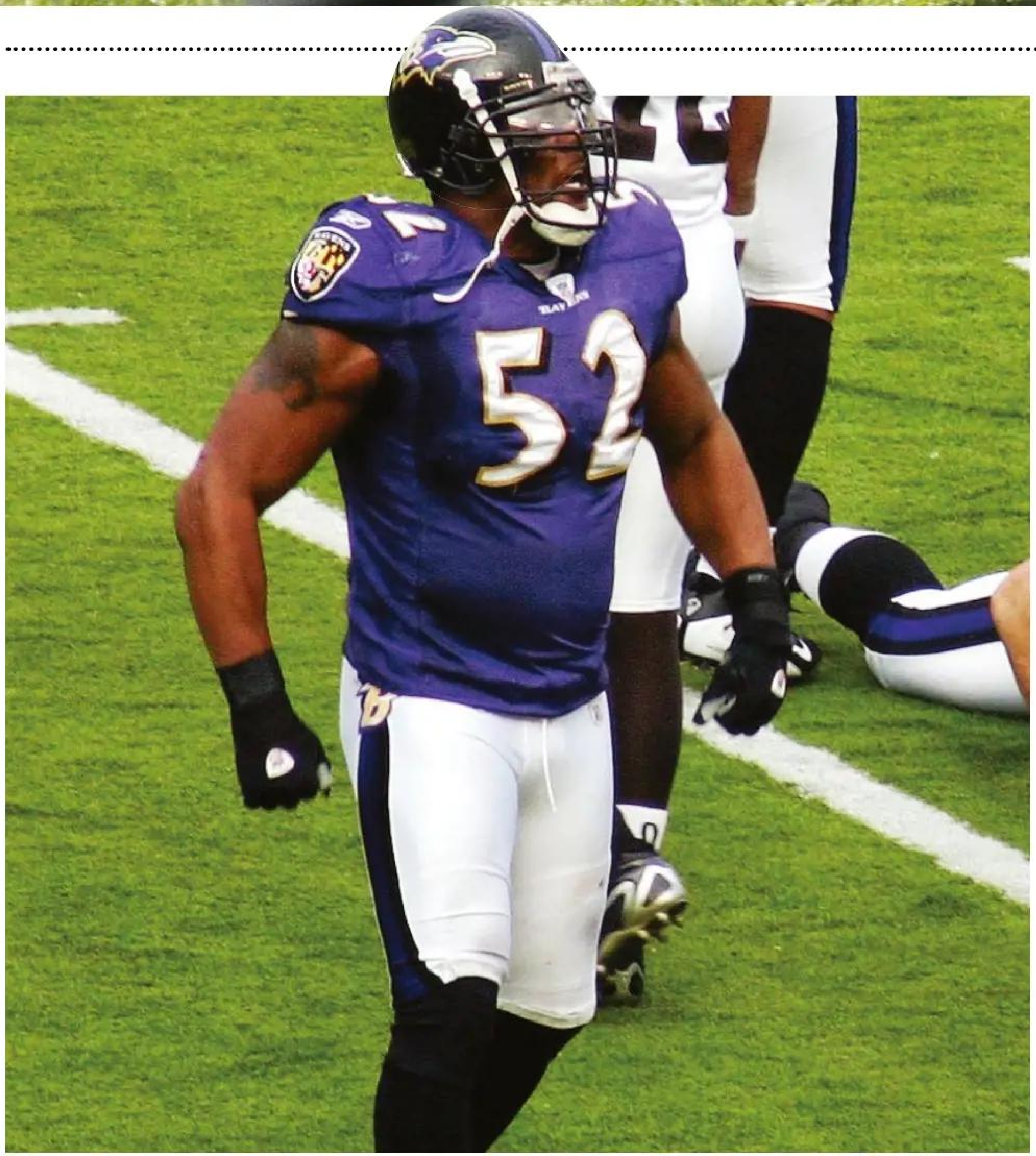
42 Playing his entire professional career as a linebacker with the New York Giants (from 1981-1993), Lawrence Taylor produced double-figure sack statistics in each season from 1984 to 1990. This run included a career-best of 20.5 in 1986, the year that he won his first of two Super Bowl titles with the Giants. That year, Taylor also became the first defensive player in history to win the NFL Most Valuable Player (MVP) award. Such was Taylor's immense standing in the game that not even suspensions for substance abuse could tarnish his reputation as one of the best defensive players to ever grace the NFL.

★ Reggie White: so good that two teams retired his jersey

REGGIE WHITE

43 During his 15 seasons in the NFL, not a lot got past Reggie White. The two-time NFL Defensive Player of the Year played as defensive end for the Philadelphia Eagles, Green Bay Packers and the Carolina Panthers, during which he racked up 198 career quarterback sacks, putting him second on the all-time list. In fact, during his Eagles career, White actually accumulated more sacks than the number of games he played.

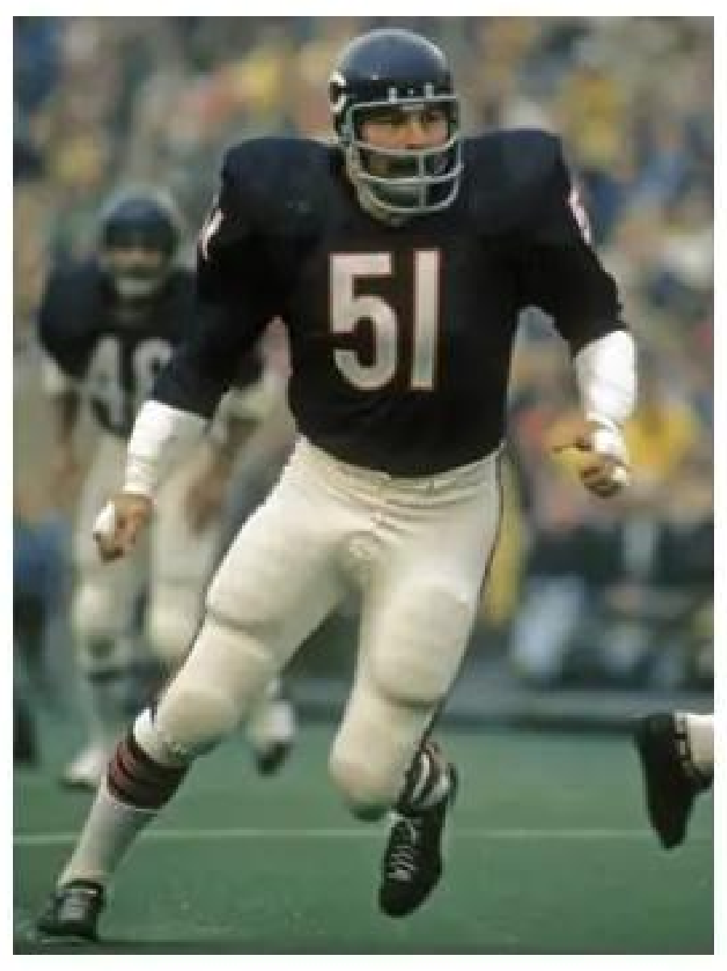
When he moved to the Packers in 1993, White scored a further 68.5 crunching quarterback sacks to become the team's all-time highest sacker at the time, as well as helping his team win Super Bowl XXXI. Selected for 13 Pro Bowls, White's influence was such that he had his number 92 jersey retired by both the Eagles and the Packers.



RAY LEWIS

44 Considered one of the greatest linebackers of all time, Lewis began his NFL career with the Baltimore Ravens in 1996 (in the team's inaugural season) and stayed with them for his entire 17-year playing stretch in the league. During his playing days the accolades rained like confetti and Lewis was selected for 13 Pro Bowls, named as an Associated Press All-Pro ten times, won the NFL Defensive Player of the Year award twice and was also only the second ever linebacker to win the Super Bowl MVP award (the first to win it on the winning team) when the Ravens triumphed at Super Bowl XXXV in 2000.

During that season, Lewis led a water-tight defense that set a 16-game single-season record for the fewest points allowed (165) and the fewest rushing yards allowed (970) – he was a hard man to get around. After an unfortunate triceps tear sidelined him for a large proportion of the 2012-13 season, Lewis returned just in time for the Ravens' playoff run that extended all the way to Super Bowl XLVII, where they triumphed over the San Francisco 49ers.

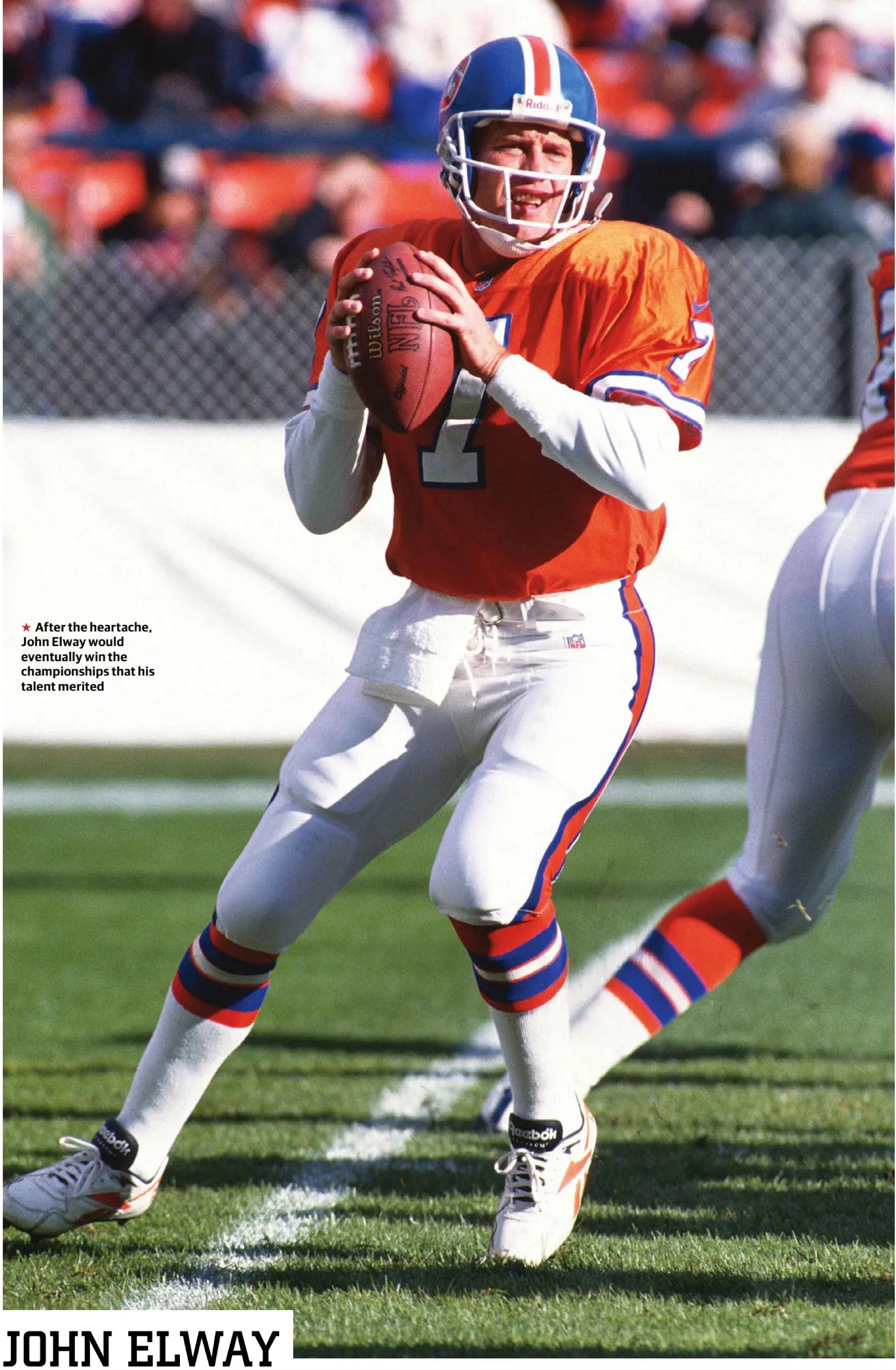


DICK BUTKUS

45 **Widely regarded as one of the best and most durable linebackers of all time, Dick Butkus played nine seasons in the NFL (from 1965-73) for the Chicago Bears and intimidated opposing players with this size and hard-hitting tackling ability.** Though he never appeared at the Super Bowl, Butkus's defensive prowess was recognised with eight Pro Bowl appearances and two NFL Defensive Player of the Year awards. After retiring, Butkus moved into acting and some people may remember him more for appearances in *Murder She Wrote* and *Magnum PI* than his antics on the pitch. But for older Bears fans and those who appreciate a crunching tackle, Butkus will always be an NFL legend.

BART STARR

46 **The modern NFL's first celebrity, the aptly named Starr became the first quarterback to win a Super Bowl when he lead the Packers to victory over the Chiefs.** He then went on to repeat the feat a year later, being named MVP on both occasions. Over a 15-year playing career, Starr remained loyal to Green Bay, delivering five championships – a feat not equalled until 2017. Though his coaching career was less successful, it didn't take any of the shine off his playing achievements. Starr became a Hall of Famer in 1977, and the Packers have retired his number 15 jersey .



★ **After the heartache, John Elway would eventually win the championships that his talent merited**

JOHN ELWAY

47 **For a time during the late 1980s, it looked as though John Elway, the quarterback for the Denver Broncos would always be the bridesmaid and never the bride.** After trips to Super Bowl XXI, XXII and XXIV, Elway finished on the losing team every time and despite being a consistent performer, it would take a dramatic slump in his team's fortunes and something of a rebirth before his talent would yield the ultimate prize.

Spending his entire 16-year career with the Broncos, Elway clocked up an impressive array of records before retiring in 1999. But it was a particular play during an AFC Championship Game against the Cleveland Browns in 1987 that proved to be his defining moment on the field. Elway helped to engineer a 98-yard game-tying touchdown drive that propelled the Broncos to Super Bowl XXI against the New York Giants. The Broncos would, crushingly, lose that game but Elway did eventually become a double champion at Super Bowls XXXII and XXXIII.

DEION SANDERS

48 **Sanders played a range of positions for a host of different NFL teams.** In stints with the Atlanta Falcons, San Francisco 49ers, Dallas Cowboys, Washington Redskins and Baltimore Ravens, he played cornerback, kick returner, punt returner and wide receiver. Amazingly, to further highlight Sanders' 'all-rounder' status, he also managed to balance a parallel sporting career and played baseball professionally for the New York Yankees, Atlanta Braves, Cincinnati Reds and the San Francisco Giants. He is still the only man to play in both a Super Bowl (winning Super Bowl XXIX with the 49ers and XXX with the Cowboys) and a World Series (with the Braves in 1992). In 1994, the same year he won the Super Bowl with the San Francisco 49ers, he was voted Defensive Player of the Year.

BRETT FAVRE

49 **Over his long and distinguished playing career, Favre's stats place him up there with the NFL's very best quarterbacks.** He was the first quarterback to complete over 6,000 passes, throw for over 70,000 yards and pass for 500 touchdowns. Drafted by the Atlanta Falcons in 1991, Favre was traded to the Green Bay Packers in 1992 and seized his opportunity to impress after an injury ruled out the Packers' starting quarterback, Don 'Majik Man' Majkowski. Incredibly, he then started every game for the Packers through to the end of the 2007 season and, subsequently, for the New York Jets and Minnesota Vikings to take his consecutive starts record to 321 (including playoff matches). Favre has led his teams to eight division championships and two Super Bowls (XXXI and XXXII), the first of which he won when the Packers defeated the New England Patriots.

TOM BRADY

50 **If there were any doubts over Tom Brady's status as one of, if not the, greatest quarterback of all time, his seventh Super Bowl triumph in his first season with the Tampa Bay Buccaneers surely laid them to rest**. It was Brady's tenth trip to the NFL's showpiece game, following nine with the New England Patriots – more than any other player. Starting his career in 2000, Brady has won multiple league MVP and Super Bowl MVP awards, as well holding records in almost every major statistical category for the playoffs and the Super Bowl. Brady's name has become synonymous with the Patriots, however, in March 2020, at the age of 42, he signed with the Tampa Bay Buccaneers. Despite the Bucs coming off a losing record in 2019, Brady duly led them to their second NFL title at Super Bowl LV. He spent two more seasons in Florida (including a swiftly reversed retirement in 2022) before finally hanging up his cleats for good in 2023 as the most decorated player in NFL history.

★ Tom Brady won six Super Bowls during his 20-year career with the New England Patriots

10 GREATEST NFL GAMES OF ALL TIME

Home to some of the biggest sporting contests in history, the NFL is proof positive of how impactful sport can be at its best

There's a reason the NFL is one of the world's most watched sporting leagues. Showcasing an athletic spectacle that manages to capture the imagination of even the most casual fan, it has been responsible for some truly memorable moments since its inception in 1920. Year after year in the NFL, heroes are born and legends are made, and the actions of both individuals and teams have contributed to some truly stunning contests.

From records being broken to underdogs upsetting the odds, the NFL has played host to some spectacular games down the years. They're milestones of the sporting world that deserve recognition, not only because of the outstanding skill on display, but because of the emotional resonance that these sporting achievements hold for so many people. With all that in mind, over the next few pages we present ten of the very best NFL games ever played for your reading pleasure.

'THE GREATEST GAME EVER PLAYED'

01 **When a game is dubbed 'the greatest ever', it's natural to take the statement with a grain of salt.** Fortunately, the Baltimore Colts and New York Giants did more than enough to justify such hyperbole when they met in the 1958 NFL Championship game. Ironically, the contest began poorly when Colts quarterback Johnny Unitas fumbled on the first play. By the end of the second quarter, however, Baltimore had fought to a 14-3 lead. What followed was better than any Hollywood movie. As New York found its feet and put 17 points on the board, the match seemed over with only seven seconds left on the clock. That was until Colts kicker Steve Myhra converted a 20-yard field goal to tie the game and ensure the match became the first in playoff history to go to overtime.

With millions watching on TV, Baltimore running back Alan Ameche scored a one-yard touchdown to give his team victory. To this day, it's claimed that this was the moment the NFL's popularity took off.

SCORE: Baltimore Colts 23 – 17
New York Giants
GAME: NFL Championship
DATE: 28 December 1958
VENUE: Yankee Stadium, New York

★ No one could've predicted before the game how intense a match Super Bowl XLIII would've become

THE 100-YARD INTERCEPTION

02 **Records are meant to be broken, but in 2009 during Super Bowl XLIII, Pittsburgh Steelers outside linebacker James Harrison set one in the most dramatic fashion possible.** After Arizona Cardinals quarterback Kurt Warner's wayward pass ended up in the arms of Harrison in his own end zone, he ran 100 yards for a then-record interception return touchdown. Aside from highlighting just how in-sync and well-oiled the Steelers were as a team – everyone on the field did everything they could to clear Harrison's path – it also sent them into half-time with a 17-7 lead.

This alone would have been enough to make Super Bowl XLIII a game to remember, but Arizona returned to the field with renewed purpose. While they struggled in the third quarter, things picked up in the fourth. Warner, wanting to make up for his earlier error, inspired his team to 16 consecutive points, including wide receiver Larry Fitzgerald's 64-yard touchdown reception. It took the game to 23-20 with only 2:37 remaining. It was quickly becoming a game of one-upmanship, but there was yet another twist to come.

It appeared the Cardinals had cemented a terrific comeback, but Steelers quarterback Ben Roethlisberger had other ideas. Working near-perfectly with wide receiver Santonio Holmes, who he found four times in a 78-yard drive, Big Ben found Holmes for the game-winning touchdown with a pass that many consider one of the best ever thrown in a Super Bowl. With the championship secured, Pittsburgh became the first team in history to win six Super Bowls, adding yet another record to the books.

A game full of highlights that are still exhilarating to watch today, Super Bowl XLIII managed to secure 98.7 million viewers, making it one of the most watched events in broadcast history. Easily one of the best finals that the NFL has ever witnessed, it's a contest that gets better every time you watch it.

SCORE: Pittsburgh Steelers 27 – 23 Arizona Cardinals
GAME: Super Bowl XLIII
DATE: 1 February 2009
VENUE: Raymond James Stadium, Tampa, FL

NAMATH'S JETS DEFY THE ODDS

SCORE: New York Jets 16 – 7 Baltimore Colts
GAME: Super Bowl III
DATE: 12 January 1969
VENUE: Orange Bowl, Miami, FL

03 **Nothing beats a good underdog story.** Before Super Bowl III, everyone had predicted a walkover victory for the dominant Baltimore Colts. Part of the NFL – which was considered the superior league – the Colts had crushed their opposition that year, finishing the 1968 season with a record of 13-1. On the flip-side were the AFL's New York Jets. Fighting their way to the main event with far less momentum, the Jets squeaked their way through to the Super Bowl thanks to a 27-23 win over the Oakland Raiders. On paper, there was only going to be one champion that year.

So when Jets quarterback Joe Namath came out three days prior to the event to arrogantly declare his team would win, everyone took it for what they assumed it was: big words from a man who knew his team didn't have a chance. As it turned out, he couldn't have been more right.

Not only did the Jets control most of the game, but by the fourth quarter they had built up a 16-0 lead. Even more surprising was that they only scored one touchdown throughout the game – provided by running back Matt Snell – a Super Bowl final record that still holds true to this day (the rest of the Jets' points were provided thanks to three field goals by kicker Jim Turner). By the time Colts running back Jerry Hill pulled a touchdown back in the closing minutes, the damage had already been done.

Namath walked away as the game's MVP, completing 17 out of 28 passes for a total of 206 yards, even without throwing a single pass in the last quarter, since he knew well that it was better to err on the side of caution than give up what was a significant lead. The Jets had systemically picked holes in the Colts' defense. It was a historic night for all involved, and a game that any fan owes it to themselves to see.

★ Super XLII was the first of two victories over the Patriots by the Giants and quarterback Eli Manning

AN IMPERFECT PERFECT RECORD

04 **It all seemed hopeless for the New York Giants.** Not only had their Super Bowl opponents the New England Patriots gone unbeaten for the entire season with a record of 18-0, but they were the heavy favourites in the biggest game of the year. With the score 14-10 in favour of the Patriots late in the fourth quarter, however, New York embarked on a drive that would not only earn them the Super Bowl that year, but cement this game has one of the biggest upsets in NFL history.

With the ball on their own 17-yard line and just 2:37 left on the clock, the Giants battled almost the entire length of the field to score a game-winning touchdown when wide receiver Plaxico Burress planted the ball down with only 35 seconds remaining. 97.5 million people tuned in to what many consider to be one of the best Super Bowls in history.

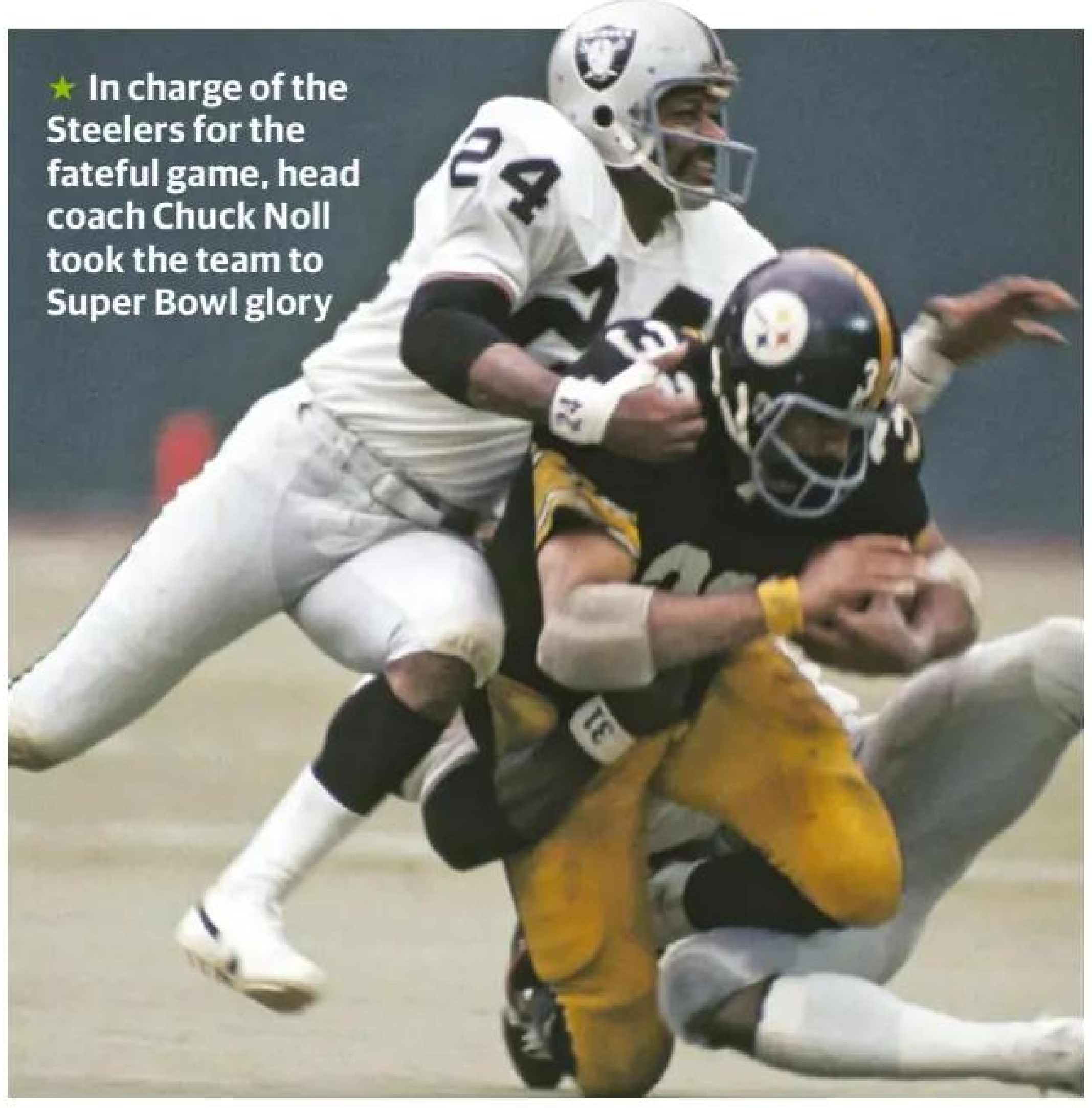
SCORE: New York Giants 17 – 14 New England Patriots
GAME: Super Bowl XLII
DATE: 3 February 2008
VENUE: University Of Phoenix Stadium, AZ

★ The overturning of the decision after Brady got sacked is one of the biggest moments in the Patriots' history

THE POWER OF THE 'TUCK' RULE

05 **Arguably the game where the New England Patriots' current dynasty began, it all came down to a single call.** With the Patriots down by three and the game rapidly drawing to a close, QB Tom Brady was sacked by Raiders linebacker Greg Biekert. To most this was an obvious fumble. But the officials saw it a little differently. Deciding it was an incomplete pass – despite Brady seemingly trying to 'tuck' the ball back into his body and thereby halting his throw attempt – control was given back to the Patriots. From this they got into position for kicker Adam Vinatieri to convert an incredible 45-yard field goal to tie things up. New England not only won in overtime, but went on to claim the Super Bowl XXXVI championship.

SCORE: Oakland Raiders 13 – 16 New England Patriots
GAME: AFC divisional playoff
DATE: 19 January 2002
VENUE: Foxboro Stadium, MA



★ In charge of the Steelers for the fateful game, head coach Chuck Noll took the team to Super Bowl glory

THE IMMACULATE RECEPTION

06 The 'Immaculate Reception' is one of the most famous plays in NFL history. Why? Mostly because it still creates controversy today. With the Oakland Raiders ahead in the dying seconds of the fourth quarter, the 1972 AFC divisional playoff seemed done and dusted. When Steelers quarterback Terry Bradshaw launched a pass to running back John Fuqua, though, everything changed.

Depending on who you choose to believe, the ball either bounced off Fuqua, the ground or Raiders safety Jack Tatum. The officials decided it was the last of these, allowing Pittsburgh fullback Franco Harris to grab the ball and run into the end zone to score a TD and ultimately win the game.

Some fans still contend that either Fuqua or the turf interfered first. If that were the case, the pass should have been ruled as incomplete. Given the contention, this face-off remains a treat to watch, if only to continually observe the game-changing play and wonder what might have been had it been called differently.

Regardless, this dispute did wonders for the Steelers. Not only did it secure their first playoff win ever, but it fuelled them to four Super Bowl victories before the decade was done. If the call had gone the other way, who knows what fate would have awaited the 'Men of Steel'.

SCORE: Oakland Raiders 7 – 13 Pittsburgh Steelers
GAME: AFC divisional playoff
DATE: 23 December 1972
VENUE: Three Rivers Stadium, Pittsburgh, PA

THE ICE BOWL

07 The 1967 NFL Championship game had everything: two teams that had genuine beef with each other, unreal conditions that led it to forever being dubbed as the 'Ice Bowl', and a dramatic climax that ensured this was a match for the ages. With the Packers driven forward by legendary coach Vince Lombardi, temperatures sunk to -26°C, a factor that had a huge, and negative, effect on the players.

Even so, the two teams squared off as everyone assumed they would. Despite jumping to a 14-0 lead within the first two quarters, the Packers would let it slide as Dallas fought back with 17 consecutive points. During the game's final minutes, though, Packers quarterback Bart Starr inspired a tremendous drive that covered 68 yards and took his team right into the end zone. The last step of this came from Starr himself, running a quarterback sneak to not only secure the touchdown, but send Green Bay through to Super Bowl II, in which it went on to claim victory a few weeks later.

SCORE: Dallas Cowboys 17 – 21 Green Bay Packers
GAME: NFL Championship Game
DATE: 31 December 1967
VENUE: Lambeau Field, Green Bay, WI

★ Conditions were so bad during the 1967 championship game that afterwards the players were emotionally spent.

THE EPIC IN MIAMI

08 By the end of the first quarter, the San Diego Chargers were up 24-0 in their AFC divisional playoff against the Miami Dolphins. To say the world wrote the Dolphins off at that point would be an understatement – the feeling in the Orange Bowl was one of embarrassment. Until the second quarter, that is. After Dolphins head coach Don Shula switched quarterback David Woodley out for Don Strock, the game took a drastic turn. Opening his account with a 17-yard pass to Duriel Harris, this play also resulted in Miami's first points after a 34-yard field goal was converted by kicker Uwe von Schamann. From there it was all-out war.

By the end of the third quarter the Dolphins had, quite incredibly, managed to score 31 points. It took a touchdown from Chargers running back James Brooks with only 58 seconds left on the clock to tie the game and, even more spectacularly, a last-second field goal block from Chargers tight end Kellen Winslow to take things through to overtime.

While the Chargers would go on to win this divisional playoff game, the sheer drama and number of records set in one evening is what makes it an all-time classic, now known as the 'Epic in Miami'.

SCORE: San Diego Chargers 41 – 38 Miami Dolphins
GAME: AFC divisional playoff
DATE: 2 January 1982
VENUE: Orange Bowl, Miami, FL

A last-minute field goal block would take the game to overtime

Garo Yepremian's kick finally secured the win for the Dolphins
SEASONS GREETING

THE LONGEST GAME IN NFL HISTORY

09 Game length is not necessarily an indication of quality, but there was so much at stake when the Miami Dolphins came up against the Kansas City Chiefs in the 1971 AFC playoffs that it seemed like it was destined to be a classic.

With the Chiefs going up 10-0 in the first quarter, the Dolphins responded in kind during the second. Throughout the third and fourth they pushed each other to the limit, scoring touchdowns that came within a heartbeat of each other. This took the game into overtime, where even an intercepted pass courtesy of Dolphins safety Jake Scott couldn't break the Chiefs' defense down.

At 7:40 of the second overtime period, however, Miami kicker Garo Yepremian converted a field goal to secure the win. The time on the clock was 82 minutes and 40 seconds.

SCORE: Miami Dolphins 27 – 24 Kansas City Chiefs
GAME: AFC divisional playoff
DATE: 25 December 1971
VENUE: Municipal Stadium, Kansas City, MO

★Tom Brady, Julian Edelman and David Andrews celebrate pulling off the most unlikely of victories

THE COMEBACK TO END ALL COMEBACKS

10 **28-3 is a scoreline that will haunt every Atlanta Falcons fan until the end of their days.** 28-3 was the score, in the Falcons' favour, with a little over two minutes left of the third quarter in Super Bowl LI. The New England Patriots had been unable to contain the rampant Atlanta offense, led by league MVP Matt Ryan, and were staring defeat in the face.

At one point, Vegas had the Falcons' chances of winning at 99.8 per cent. Three teams had previously overcome a deficit of 10 points to win a Super Bowl – the Patriots had done it themselves in 2015 – but 25? It wasn't just improbable, it was unthinkable, laughable. It shouldn't have been possible.

Not for Bill Belichick's Pats team. Not for Tom Brady. A pair of James White touchdowns, a Danny Amendola score, a Stephen Gostkowski field goal and one breathtaking Julian Edelman catch later, and the scores were level. For the first time ever, the Super Bowl would be decided in overtime.

From that point on, the outcome was inevitable. Brady and White combined to produce a 75-yard drive, and the latter ran in his third touchdown of the night to clinch victory. It was the first time the Patriots had led the game.

Super Bowl LI set records which, in all likelihood, will stand for decades. It might still be fresh in the memory, but it's already reached mythic status. Few would argue against it as the greatest game in the history of the NFL.

SCORE: New England Patriots 34 – 28 Atlanta Falcons
GAME: Super Bowl LI
DATE: 5 February 2017
VENUE: NRG Stadium, Houston, TX

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THANK YOU 12s

MEET THE TEAMS

SUBWAY SUBWAY
BUD LIGHT
71 WALTER JONES 97-09
96 CORTEZ KENNEDY 90-00

78. BUFFALO BILLS
80. MIAMI DOLPHINS
82. NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS
84. NEW YORK JETS
86. BALTIMORE RAVENS
88. CINCINNATI BENGALS
90. CLEVELAND BROWNS
92. PITTSBURGH STEELERS
94. HOUSTON TEXANS
96. INDIANAPOLIS COLTS
98. JACKSONVILLE JAGUARS
100. TENNESSEE TITANS
102. DENVER BRONCOS
104. KANSAS CITY CHIEFS
106. LAS VEGAS RAIDERS
108. LOS ANGELES CHARGERS
110. DALLAS COWBOYS
112. NEW YORK GIANTS
114. PHILADELPHIA EAGLES
116.WASHINGTON COMMANDERS
118. CHICAGO BEARS
120. DETROIT LIONS
122. GREEN BAY PACKERS
124. MINNESOTA VIKINGS
126. ATLANTA FALCONS
128. CAROLINA PANTHERS
130. NEW ORLEANS SAINTS
132. TAMPA BAY BUCCANEERS
134. ARIZONA CARDINALS
136. LOS ANGELES RAMS
138. SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS
140. SEATTLE SEAHAWKS

From Buffalo and New England to Seattle and San Francisco, get the lowdown on the upcoming season with our detailed profiles on every NFL team

The NFL is the sum of many parts – the organisation, the culture, the fans, the media – but ultimately it comes down to the teams competing on the field, week in, week out. It's here that individual skill and collective excellence combine to produce some of the fiercest, most competitive, and most entertaining contests in sport.

The teams are the heart and soul of the NFL, and each has its own strengths, weaknesses, legendary figures and fierce rivalries. From storied franchises that have fallen on hard times to promising teams built around a core of bright young talent, football is home to championship-winning juggernauts, plucky underdogs and everything in between.

In this section, we'll shine a light on the NFL's 32 franchises. We'll provide key background info, take stock of their performances last year, outline their hopes and expectations for the season ahead and look back on a key moment from the previous year. You'll also find essential info on the key players in each team, from the coaching staff to the big names on both offense and defense. No one player is bigger than the team, but there are definitely those whose talents can decide the outcome of a play, a game and even a season.

Read on to get the lowdown on who to watch and what to expect in this year's NFL season. Whether it's seeing what went right or wrong for your team last time out, discovering the hottest rookies who are due to break out this season, or scoping out the prospects of your rivals, we've got you covered.

BUFFALO BILLS

Can the Bills finally break through and reach the Super Bowl after years of close calls?

© Getty Images

Another strong regular season. Another playoff disappointment. It's becoming a familiar and frustrating pattern for Bills fans. Since 2019, Buffalo has posted five straight winning seasons and captured four AFC East titles, but each time the Lombardi Trophy has remained tantalisingly out of reach. And with Josh Allen now entering his eighth year in the league, the sense of urgency is mounting for a franchise that hasn't reached the Super Bowl in over three decades.

The 2024 campaign saw the Bills go 13-4, a remarkable improvement on the previous season in what many predicted would be a down year for the franchise following the loss of several senior players. Chief among those departures was star receiver Stefon Diggs, but Allen barely missed a step without his top target, and emerging weapons like Dalton Kincaid and James Cook stepped up admirably.

Defensively, Buffalo held firm despite being beset by injuries. Matt Milano's return late in the year helped steady the unit, while the likes of Terrel Bernard and Damar Hamlin improved significantly. Even so, familiar postseason demons resurfaced. The Bills were bounced from the playoffs once more by the Chiefs – their fourth postseason loss to Patrick Mahomes in five years.

The offseason has brought less upheaval this time around, with the front office knowing they need to maintain an optimum environment for their MVP quarterback to succeed. Buffalo remains a well-coached, experienced, and competitive team – still the class of the AFC East. But with the conference getting deeper and hungrier, the Bills' margin for error is shrinking.

The Bills are still strong contenders. But in 2025, being 'in the mix' won't satisfy anyone in Western New York.

> "Buffalo remains a well-coached, experienced, and competitive team – still the class of the AFC East"

ESTABLISHED **1959**

HEAD COACH **SEAN MCDERMOTT**

STADIUM **HIGHMARK STADIUM**

DIVISION **AFC EAST**

RIVALS **NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS, MIAMI DOLPHINS, NEW YORK JETS**

2024 RECORD **13-4**

2025 SCHEDULE **0.467**

★ ★ HONOURS ★ ★

DIVISION
1964, 1965, 1966, 1980, 1988, 1989, 1990, 1991, 1993, 1995, 2020, 2021,2022, 2023, 2024

CONFERENCE
1990, 1991, 1992, 1993

LEAGUE
1964, 1965

© Getty Images

STAR PLAYER **JOSH ALLEN**

DOB: **21 MAY 1996** POS: **QUARTERBACK** NO. **17**

★ **While the Bills' season once again ended in heartbreak, there was at least some consolation for Josh Allen, who finally took home the NFL MVP award after another exceptional season.** Efficiency was Allen's watchword in 2024, as he threw a career-low six interceptions and posted an average QB rating of over 100 for just the second time. While his overall passing and rushing yardage was down, this was more due to Buffalo's improved, and more balanced, offense allowing its quarterback to pick his moments – which were spectacular. Though it came in a narrow loss to the Rams, Allen's Week 14 performance made NFL history as he became the first player since the AFL-NFL merger to post three passing touchdowns and three rushing touchdowns in a single game.

KEY PERSONNEL

JAMES COOK
RUNNING BACK

© Getty Images

Cook broke out in 2024, eclipsing 1,200 rushing yards and adding more than 300 through the air across the regular and postseason. With Devin Singletary gone, Cook proved he could carry the load, offering a blend of vision, burst and reliability. He's a key part of Buffalo's new-look offense.

MATT MILANO
LINEBACKER

© Getty Images

Before a mid-season leg injury, Milano was playing at an All-Pro level once again. He's the leader of the Bills defense – cerebral, tough, and dependable. After returning in time for the playoffs, Buffalo will hope he can complete a full season for the first time since 2022.

DION DAWKINS
OFFENSIVE TACKLE

© Getty Images

A mainstay of Buffalo's much-improved O-line, Dawkins was rewarded for another stellar season with a fourth straight Pro Bowl selection. Josh Allen was sacked just 14 times in 2024 – a career low – and much of the MVP's success is due to the protection afforded by Dawkins and company.

SEAN MCDERMOTT
HEAD COACH

© Getty Images

McDermott now enters his ninth season in charge, having firmly re-established Buffalo as a perennial playoff team. But after another postseason defeat to Kansas City, pressure is mounting. His ability to guide the team to a Super Bowl will define his legacy.

2024

HIGHLIGHT OF THE SEASON

While the Chiefs may have had the last laugh, the Bills continued their regular-season streak over Kansas City with a dramatic win in Week 11. Patrick Mahomes may not have been at his electric best throughout 2024, but the Chiefs winning machine had still managed to grind out nine straight wins to remain as the only undefeated team in the league on their visit to Highmark Stadium. The most-watched regular season game since 2007 lived up to the hype, with both teams trading the lead and the Bills holding a two-point advantage with just over two minutes on the clock – an eternity when you're playing the Chiefs. Facing 4th and 2 on the Chiefs' 26 yard line but knowing that settling for a field goal would leave them vulnerable, the Bills went for it. Cue a superhuman Josh Allen run, a Buffalo touchdown, an ecstatic crowd in Orchard Park and a first Chiefs defeat of the season. For many, this was the moment Josh Allen earned his MVP award.

© Getty Images

© Getty Images

MIAMI DOLPHINS

A disappointing step backwards in 2024 has Miami wondering where to go next

All the arrows were pointing up for the Dolphins heading into 2024. Two straight runs to the playoffs and an 11-win campaign built on some of the most exciting offensive football in the NFL had the 'Phins faithful dreaming of a first divisional title since 2008. Those dreams, it turns out, were misplaced.

The Dolphins defense remained at a similar level to the previous campaign – solid, if not elite – but that potent pass-led offense fell off a cliff. The deadly receiving duo of Tyreek Hill and Jaylen Waddle both had disappointing years by their high standards, and neither was helped by an underwhelming quarterback carousel as Tua Tagovailoa dealt with yet more concussion-related injuries. Skylar Thompson, Tim Boyle and Tyler Huntley all filled in under center for Miami at one time or other. None did so effectively.

Now entering their fourth season under Mike McDaniel, the Dolphins find themselves at something of a crossroads. This no longer looks like a team that can compete for the Super Bowl – or even realistically break the longest active playoff victory drought in the league. There's talent on the roster, unquestionably, but there are major holes there too that could mean the team looks at a rebuild, especially with Tua's future uncertain and a stacked QB draft class on the horizon.

Whatever happens, this is likely to be a defining season in Miami for the near-term future of the franchise. Do they double-down on their current stars to recapture some of that 2023 magic? Or is it time to blow things up and go back to the drawing board? Either way, it's unlikely to be dull.

> "There's talent on the roster, unquestionably, but there are major holes there too"

ESTABLISHED **1965**

HEAD COACH **MIKE MCDANIEL**

STADIUM **HARD ROCK STADIUM**

DIVISION **AFC EAST**

RIVALS **BUFFALO BILLS, NEW YORK JETS, NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS, TAMPA BAY BUCCANEERS**

2024 RECORD **8-9**

2025 SCHEDULE **0.474**

★ ★ **HONOURS** ★ ★

DIVISION
1971, 1972, 1973, 1974, 1979, 1981, 1983, 1984, 1985, 1992, 1994, 2000, 2008

CONFERENCE
1971, 1972, 1973, 1982, 1984

LEAGUE
1972, 1973

© Getty Images

STAR PLAYER **TYREEK HILL**

DOB: **1 MARCH 1994** POS: **WIDE RECEIVER** NO. **10**

The 2024 season hit a low for Tyreek Hill before he'd even taken the field, as the Dolphins' star wide receiver was detained by police for a traffic violation on his way to the season opener in Miami. Hill was handcuffed and forced to the ground, but was fortunately released before any further damage was done. He could have been forgiven for sitting out the match-up against the Jags, but instead turned in a seven-catch, 130-yard, game-winning performance – including a monster 80-yard touchdown. The rest of Hill's season was less eventful, for better and for worse. As the Dolphins offense struggled, the team's most talented playmaker was left frustrated. His ambition is to win another Super Bowl, and another difficult season may see the 'Cheetah' looking for the exit.

KEY PERSONNEL

MIKE MCDANIEL
HEAD COACH

© Getty Images

A first losing season in Miami has put pressure on McDaniel to turn things around after two consecutive trips to the postseason. Passionate, articulate and refreshingly candid, the young head coach is set for the toughest season in his career to date.

DE'VON ACHANE
RUNNING BACK

© Getty Images

After a thrilling rookie season that was interrupted by injury, Achane stepped up to become Miami's lead RB in 2024 and was surprisingly the focal point of the team's offense as both a rusher and receiver. A final total of 1,499 yards from scrimmage and 12 touchdowns was an impressive return.

DARREN WALLER
TIGHT END

© Getty Images

After trading Jonnu Smith to the Steelers, the Dolphins took a gamble on Waller, who has come out of retirement to join the team. He recorded 52 catches for 552 yards and one touchdown during his one season with the Giants in 2023, having previously played for the Ravens and the Raiders. Time will tell what his return brings.

TUA TAGOVAILOA
QUARTERBACK

© Getty Images

Concerns continue to mount over Tua's future in Miami, both because of his increasingly conservative play (his yards per attempt was down significantly in 2024) and more importantly because of his health. Another concussion last season has fans – and likely Tua himself – wondering if it's wise for him to continue in the NFL.

2024

HIGHLIGHT OF THE SEASON

As underwhelming as the season may have been on the whole, there were still some stratospheric highs for the Dolphins in 2024. And if there was a game that recaptured some of the excitement of Mike McDaniel's previous seasons in charge, it was the Week 14 divisional match-up against the Jets at Hard Rock Stadium. Both teams came in with losing records and seemingly decided that neither of them was interested in playing defense as they put up eight straight scoring drives with no punts until well into the third quarter. De'Von Achane and Tyreek Hill both notched short-yard scores while Jason Sanders was perfect on four field goals (though he missed a crucial extra point). With the score 26-26, the Dolphins won the toss and proceeded to march down the field in overtime, capping off a nine-play, 70-yard drive with a Jonnu Smith walk-off touchdown. The win took the Dolphins to 6-7, and while the early-season losses ultimately proved too much to overcome, the overtime madness kept Miami in the Wild Card hunt, at least for another week.

© Getty Images

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NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS

Once the NFL's premier dynasty, the Patriots have reset once again for 2025

Oh, how the mighty have fallen. After the departure of Bill Belichick following the 2023 season, the last major pillar of the NFL's greatest-ever dynasty was gone. In its place now is a team that needs a serious rebuild after a second successive four-win season.

To be fair, this is the norm. What's unusual is that the Patriots, with Belichick and Tom Brady at the helm, were able to sustain their dominance for such an unprecedented period of time. The quarterbacks and head coaches who succeeded that pair had truly impossible tasks, but while a return to Super Bowl contention still seems a long way off, there are at least shoots of hope for Pats fans heading into the 2025 season.

Quarterback Drake Maye will be given the reins from Week 1 this time around and showed plenty of promise in difficult circumstances during his rookie season. He'll be aided by a retooled offense, which has been the main focus of the New England front office during the offseason. New weapons in the receiving corps and an improved offensive line should allow Maye to spend less time scrambling to avoid sacks – an all-too-common occurrence in 2024.

There's a new head coach in town too, as Patriots legend Mike Vrabel returns to Foxborough to lead the team following a year of consulting in Cleveland. Vrabel won three Super Bowls as a player in New England and led the Titans to three straight playoff appearances during his time at the helm in Tennessee. If he's to repeat the trick here, he'll need to contend with an AFC East dominated by the Buffalo Bills and an impatient fanbase hungry for success.

> "There are at least shoots of hope for Pats fans heading into the 2025 season"

ESTABLISHED **1959**

HEAD COACH **MIKE VRABEL**

STADIUM **GILLETTE STADIUM**

DIVISION **AFC EAST**

RIVALS **BUFFALO BILLS, NEW YORK JETS, MIAMI DOLPHINS, INDIANAPOLIS COLTS**

2024 RECORD **4-13**

2025 SCHEDULE **0.429**

★★ **HONOURS** ★★

DIVISION

1963, 1978, 1986, 1996, 1997, 2001, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019

CONFERENCE

1985, 1996, 2001, 2003, 2004, 2007, 2011, 2014, 2016, 2017, 2018

LEAGUE

2001, 2003, 2004, 2014, 2016, 2018

© Getty Images

STAR PLAYER **DRAKE MAYE**

DOB: **30 AUGUST 2002** POS: **QUARTERBACK** NO. **10**

★ **The search for a Tom Brady successor was always going to be an impossible task.** Cam Newton and Mac Jones both failed to fill the gargantuan shoes left by the Patriots' greatest-ever player, and while no one is saying that Drake Maye is going to hit those highs, the second-year quarterback at least has Pats fans dreaming of a return to better times. Despite going 3-9 as a starter after displacing Jacoby Brissett in his rookie year, Maye impressed both on the ground and in the air. The exceptional performances of Jayden Daniels and Bo Nix may have outshone New England's QB, but given the quality of the Patriots roster – and the team's commitment to strengthening the O-line protecting Maye – there's plenty of reasons to believe that he can take a leap forward in 2025.

KEY PERSONNEL

MIKE VRABEL
HEAD COACH

Public Domain, Wikipedia

Vrabel knows what it means to win with the Patriots as a player, though similar could be said of his predecessor, Jerod Mayo. Unlike Mayo, though, Vrabel comes with considerable head coaching pedigree. Still, the NFL's Coach of the Year in 2021 will have his work cut out in Foxborough.

STEFON DIGGS
WIDE RECEIVER

© Getty Images

A familiar face to Pats fans, Diggs returns to the AFC East from Houston after terrorising New England for four years with the Bills. He will be 32 this season, and he's coming off a torn ACL, but Diggs adds immediate quality to a wide receiver room that has sorely lacked it.

WILL CAMPBELL
OFFENSIVE TACKLE

© Getty Images

The fourth overall pick in the 2025 NFL Draft fills an immediate need for the Patriots. Campbell performed at a high level for three years at LSU, and he'll likely start from Week 1 as part of a new-look offensive line assembled to protect Drake Maye.

MILTON WILLIAMS
DEFENSIVE END

© Getty Images

In a statement move, the Patriots made Williams the highest-paid player in franchise history by signing him to a four-year, $104 million deal. A Super Bowl champion with the Eagles boasting unnatural speed for his position, Williams was underused in Philadelphia. That won't be the case in New England.

2024

HIGHLIGHT OF THE SEASON

Picking highlights from a four-win season can be tricky, particularly when the most impressive of those wins came in a dead-rubber game against the playoff-bound Bills in Week 18. But it's easy to forget that New England's season got off to an impressive start, with an upset 16-10 road victory over the much-fancied Bengals. With Jacoby Brissett under center, this was a game won on the ground with grit and determination. Rhamondre Stevenson punched in a three-yard touchdown in the second quarter on the way to an impressive 120-yard day, and Joey Slye was perfect on all three field goal attempts as the Patriots ground down their opponents. The defense did their part to limit an admittedly out-of-sorts Joe Burrow too, posting a fumble recovery and turnover on downs to keep one of the AFC's deadliest quarterbacks to just 164 yards and no scores. The Bengals did eventually score through Zack Moss, but New England kept things tight through the fourth quarter to claim an unlikely but deserved win. Was it a false dawn? Sure. But it was a win worth celebrating all the same.

© Getty Images

© Getty Images

NEW YORK JETS

New coach, new GM, new quarterback... welcome to the New York Jets

The Aaron Rodgers experiment turned out to be a damp squib. Even though he turned in one of the best statistical performances in history from a Jets quarterback, he failed to ignite the team and cost head coach Robert Saleh and general manager Joe Douglas their jobs. Both were in-season firings, showing just how bad things had got at 1 Jets Drive.

Once more, therefore, the team is starting over. The new head coach is former Jets cornerback Aaron Glenn, who made a name for himself as the defensive coordinator at Detroit before getting his big chance. Cynical Jets fans will point out that the team has tried the defensive coordinator route many times in recent years, with a spectacular lack of success.

Steadying the quarterback position was the first order of business, and rather than bring in a rookie, the Jets are trying a reclamation project. Justin Fields is in, having failed to stick in his first two NFL gigs. His rushing ability gives the Jets offense a dimension it has never had before, and the run game will probably be what they choose to build their offense around. A stable of three capable running backs and an evolving offensive line could once more give the Jets a ground-and-pound identity.

On defense there is a smattering of talent but a lot of question marks too. Jermaine Johnson is coming back from an Achilles injury, DJ Reed has left in free agency and Sauce Gardner has doubts over his physicality. A rebuilt secondary which has added cornerback Brandon Stephens and safety Andre Cisco will hope to benefit from an improved pass-rush (Glenn likes to blitz) featuring Will McDonald and Quinnen Williams.

> "Justin Fields' rushing ability gives the Jets offense a dimension it has never had before"

ESTABLISHED **1959**

HEAD COACH **AARON GLENN**

STADIUM **METLIFE STADIUM**

DIVISION **AFC EAST**

RIVALS **NEW YORK GIANTS, BUFFALO BILLS, MIAMI DOLPHINS, NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS**

2024 RECORD **5-12**

2025 SCHEDULE **0.460**

★★ **HONOURS** ★★

DIVISION

1968, 1969, 1998, 2002

LEAGUE

1968

© Getty Images

STAR PLAYER GARRETT WILSON

DOB: **22 JULY 2000** POS: **WIDE RECEIVER** NO. **5**

Somehow, amid all the turmoil, injuries and uncertainty at quarterback, Wilson has managed to put together three consecutive thousand-yard seasons to start his career. Now he has the chance to reunite with his old college quarterback, following the acquisition of Justin Fields. Fields has not been a prolific passer, but the two should still have some chemistry after their Ohio State days. Wilson has two main strengths – getting separation and catching the ball. He has smooth moves and an ability to explode out of cuts that often leaves his defender trailing, and he regularly makes highlight-reel grabs. Most observers believe he would have had an even better season last year had Aaron Rodgers not been fixated on his old pal Davante Adams during the second half of the season.

KEY PERSONNEL

WILL MCDONALD IV
DEFENSIVE END

© Getty Images

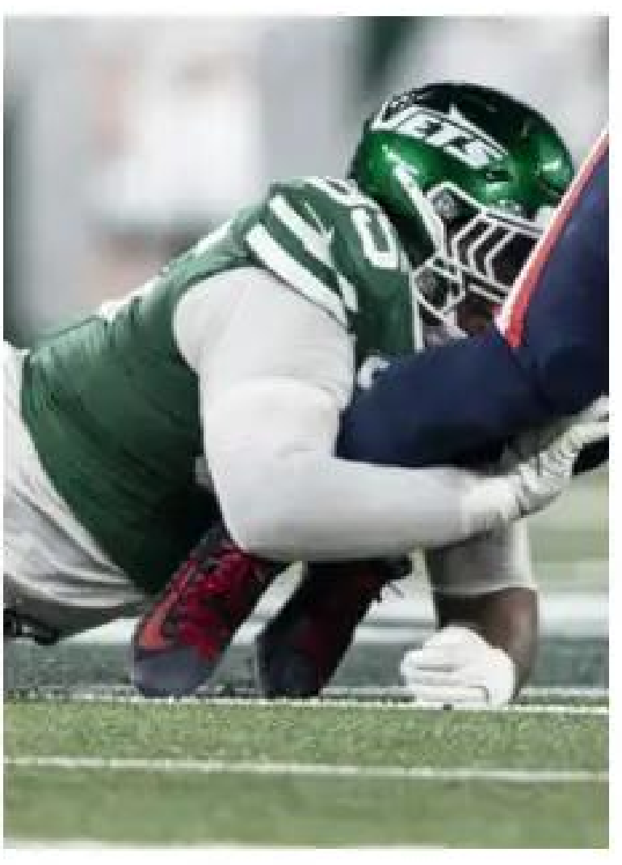
McDonald was a controversial first-round pick in 2023, but he showed flashes of ability last year and may blossom in the blitz-heavy packages expected under the new coaching staff. His 10.5 sacks last year were deceptive (five came in weeks two and three) but he has the athletic ability to become a dominating pass-rusher.

BREECE HALL
RUNNING BACK

© Getty Images

Hall figures to get the bulk of the work in a strong running backs stable, with Braelon Allen and Isaiah Davis chipping in (and don't forget Justin Fields' contribution here). Hall's smooth running style disguises his speed, and he can ghost through openings in the defense before outrunning the pursuit.

QUINNEN WILLIAMS
DEFENSIVE TACKLE



© Getty Images

Williams looked like the next great interior defensive lineman back in 2022, when he notched 12 sacks, but he has been relatively quiet in the last two campaigns. It is hoped that a new coaching staff and defensive system will rekindle his fire and give the Jets a true disruptor on their line.

JAMIEN SHERWOOD
LINEBACKER

© Getty Images

The Jets were patient with Sherwood while he transitioned from defensive back to linebacker, but they were handsomely rewarded last year, when he started 16 games and registered 158 tackles. He in turn was rewarded by the Jets with a three-year, $45 million contract extension in the offseason.

2024

HIGHLIGHT OF THE SEASON

Hope tends to die early in the season when it comes to the Jets, but in Week 3 they gave their fans something to savour. Not only did they dismantle their hated divisional rivals, the Patriots, they did it in style, with Aaron Rodgers looking very much like his old self.

Rodgers threw for 281 yards and two touchdowns on his way to a 118.9 passer rating, while the defense put the clamps on New England, limiting them to just 11 first downs all game, while sacking Jacoby Brissett five times and dumping the Patriots' brand new first-round pick, Drake Maye, twice. The two-headed beast of Breece Hall and Braelon Allen shared the workload in the running game, tight end Tyler Conklin had one of the best games of his career and the win seemed to signal that this team was finally ready to compete again in the AFC East. It lifted them to a 2-1 record but things quickly unravelled – they won just one of their next ten games to sink back into obscurity.

© Getty Images

© Getty Images

BALTIMORE RAVENS

The Ravens are proof that being grounded is not always a bad thing

Everybody expected the Ravens to be a devastating rushing team last year, but even so, they exceeded expectations. The decision to sign Derrick Henry proved to be the best offseason decision by any team in the league, as he was in unstoppable form. With a huge contribution from Lamar Jackson, the Ravens ran over their opponents, amassing a league-leading 3,189 yards at a league-best 5.8 yards per carry. The dominance of their ground attack allowed the Ravens to attempt just 477 passes, the second-lowest in the league, and again their average per attempt was the best in the game. With an offense piling up over 7,000 yards the defense did not have to do much, but they delivered a respectable performance of their own, and the only area where the Ravens struggled was in penalties, where they gave away a few too many for comfort.

In the divisional round, Baltimore pushed the Bills to their limit but couldn't find a way through – and now, the question for the upcoming season is how do they take the next step? Two free-agency losses could bite – offensive lineman Patrick Mekari and cornerback Brandon Stephens have both moved on, and the Ravens were unable to bring in replacements. Third-round draftee Emery Jones has great potential on the offensive line, but he will take time to contribute, while first-rounder Malaki Starks is a safety rather than a corner.

It all adds up to the Ravens mostly running it back again this year. As long as Henry continues to hold up under his heavy workload, they will be a brutal opponent for anyone to take on, but if he starts to decline (he will turn 32 before the end of the season), the Ravens could find themselves struggling.

> "As long as Henry continues to hold up, the Ravens will be a brutal opponent for anyone to take on"

ESTABLISHED **1996**

HEAD COACH **JOHN HARBAUGH**

STADIUM **M&T BANK STADIUM**

DIVISION **AFC NORTH**

RIVALS **PITTSBURGH STEELERS**

2024 RECORD **12-5**

2025 SCHEDULE **0.533**

★★ **HONOURS** ★★

DIVISION
2003, 2006, 2011, 2012, 2018, 2019, 2023, 2024

CONFERENCE
2000, 2012

LEAGUE
2000, 2012

© Getty Images

STAR PLAYER **DERRICK HENRY**

DOB: **4 JANUARY 1994** POS: **RUNNING BACK** NO. **22**

★ **Two quiet games at the start of the season had a few people whispering that King Henry's crown had slipped.** He responded with nine 100-yard efforts the rest of the way to finish with 1,921 yards and 16 touchdowns. He then demolished the Steelers in the Wild Card game, and many people believe the Bills would have been vanquished had the Ravens called Henry's number more than 16 times in the divisional round.

Henry spends a small fortune each year (allegedly as much as $240,000) on maintaining his body, including employing a personal chef and working out twice a day during the offseason. Nobody takes his profession more seriously than Henry, and it is paying off as he still shows no signs of slowing down.

KEY PERSONNEL

LAMAR JACKSON

QUARTERBACK

© Getty Images

Jackson is entering his prime years, having come through a rough, injury-troubled period in 2021 and 2022. With the luxury of having Derrick Henry lining up behind him, he turned in career-best numbers for yards (4,172) and touchdowns (41), as well as offering his own unique threat as a runner.

ZAY FLOWERS

WIDE RECEIVER

© Getty Images

In only his second season, Flowers established himself as the Ravens' top target in the passing game. He actually caught fewer passes than in his rookie season (74 as opposed to 77), but turned them into 1,059 yards, over 200 more than in his rookie campaign.

MARK ANDREWS

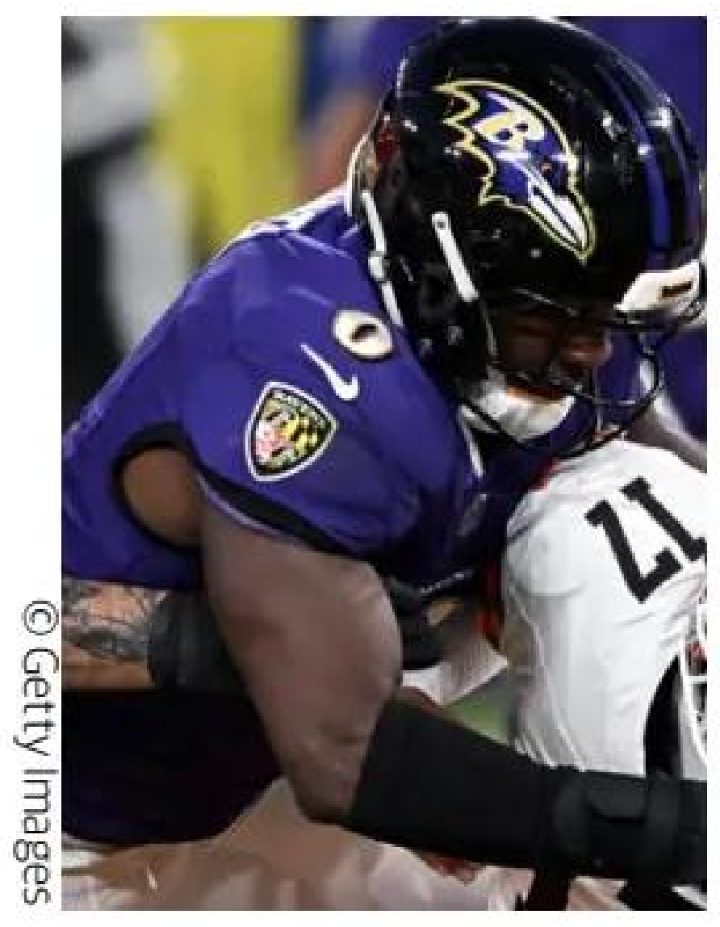
TIGHT END

© Getty Images

Andrews' season ended in painful fashion, dropping the two-point conversion that would have tied the playoff game against the Bills, but he was a solid contributor after shaking off a slow start while recovering from injury (just six catches in the first four games) and he remains one of Lamar Jackson's favourite outlets.

ROQUAN SMITH

LINEBACKER



© Getty Images

Smith has amassed more than 150 tackles in five straight campaigns (he had 154 last year), the last two and a half of which were with the Ravens. As one of the defense's locker-room leaders he is also extremely durable, missing just one game last year with a hamstring injury.

2024

HIGHLIGHT OF THE SEASON

The Ravens had developed such confidence in their offense that they were able to shrug off slow starts and know that things would improve. Against the Chargers, in Week 12, Lamar Jackson had completed just two of six passes for 18 yards with just over three minutes remaining in the second quarter. The Ravens were trailing by three and when Derrick Henry was stopped on a third-and-one inside their own 20-yard line, everyone expected them to punt. Instead, Mark Andrews took a direct snap and converted on fourth down to keep the drive alive, and Jackson was sparked into life. He completed passes of nine and 22 yards to Justice Hill and Zay Flowers, respectively, before a pass interference call set them up at the Chargers' 40. Jackson then calmly dropped back and uncorked a deep pass towards Rashod Bateman, who battled through smothering coverage (a flag was flown for pass interference) to grab the ball for a stunning touchdown. The Ravens had taken the lead, and they had also shown that their offense could take over a game at any moment.

© Getty Images

© Getty Images

CINCINNATI BENGALS

Stuck in limbo, the Bengals will try to shift up a gear this season

How does a team with a healthy Joe Burrow at quarterback fail to make the postseason? The fifth-year player was simply superb last year, throwing for 4,918 yards and 43 touchdowns – both league-leading numbers. He completed more than 70 per cent of his passes.

The problems lie elsewhere, and once more the offensive line is included because Burrow absorbed 48 sacks last year and the team lost guard Alex Cappa in free agency. It's difficult to see the ground game as a weakness, given the overall productivity of the offense, but they could do with more depth behind Chase Brown. Running more often would also take some of the heat off Burrow.

The biggest issues, however, are on defense, where the Bengals struggled to protect the 472 points scored by their offense. Trey Hendrickson had another excellent season rushing the passer, but he needs more help.

A slow start was again an issue – opening 1-3 for the second straight season put the Bengals in a hole and even a five-game winning streak to end the season was not enough to turn things around. Now Zac Taylor is firmly in the hot seat after consecutive 9-8 seasons.

Cincinnati brought in some second-rank free agents (Tedarrell Slaton, Joseph Ossai and Oren Burks) to help on defense, and kept the focus there in the draft with Shemar Stewart and Demetrius Knight. Stewart will be given a chance to complement Hendrickson in the pass rush, but was considered a bit of a reach by many analysts.

Running back Tahj Brooks was an intriguing choice and could give the running game a shot in the arm, especially in short-yardage situations.

> "The biggest issues are on defense, where the Bengals struggled to protect the 472 points scored by their offense"

ESTABLISHED **1967**

HEAD COACH **ZAC TAYLOR**

STADIUM **PAYCOR STADIUM**

DIVISION **AFC NORTH**

RIVALS
CLEVELAND BROWNS

2024 RECORD **9-8**

2025 SCHEDULE **0.509**

★★ **HONOURS** ★★

DIVISION
1970, 1973, 1981, 1988, 1990, 2005, 2009, 2013, 2015, 2021, 2022

CONFERENCE
1981, 1988, 2021

© Getty Images

STAR PLAYER **JOE BURROW**

DOB: **10 DECEMBER 1996** POS: **QUARTERBACK** NO. **9**

★ **Burrow is firmly established as a top five quarterback in the league, but the Bengals continue to play Russian roulette with their franchise player.** When healthy, he is as good as anyone in the game, but the amount of punishment he takes behind the line is worrying in the extreme. It's not that the Bengals front office doesn't realise that – every offseason seems to involve a revamping of the line at the moment – but they need to hit on a solid combination soon. How good is he? Last season he became the first player in the history of the NFL to have 250 yards and three touchdowns in eight consecutive games – but the Bengals were just 5-3 in those eight games, highlighting the deficiencies in his supporting cast.

KEY PERSONNEL

CHASE BROWN
RUNNING BACK

© Getty Images

Brown put together an excellent sophomore campaign, stepping in for the departed Joe Mixon and delivering almost identical numbers. After a quiet rookie season, he only narrowly missed 1,000 yards in 2024, racking up 990 and adding another 360 on 54 receptions.

JA'MARR CHASE
WIDE RECEIVER

© Getty Images

Chase was excellent in his first three seasons with the Bengals. In his fourth, he was other-worldly. He caught 72.6 per cent of the balls thrown his way, and that translated into 127 catches for 1,708 yards and 17 touchdowns. It is difficult to imagine how the best receiver in the game could improve in 2025.

TREY HENDRICKSON
DEFENSIVE END

© Getty Images

Hendrickson followed up his great third season with the Bengals with a year that was even better. He once more logged 17.5 sacks, but upped his tackles and defended passes, while seeing his QB hits explode from 25 to 36. He is one of the team's best-ever free-agent signings.

MIKE GESICKI
TIGHT END

© Getty Images

Although he sits in the second tier of NFL tight ends, Gesicki was a valuable outlet receiver for Burrow and enjoyed a strong 2024 campaign (his first with the Bengals). His 62.7 per cent catch rate was by far the best of his career, and he turned that into 65 catches for 665 yards.

2024

HIGHLIGHT OF THE SEASON

The Bengals defense had a rough year, but against the defending Super Bowl champions, in Week 2, they showed they could put together a great run of plays. First, an interception by DJ Turner was overturned on a fairly soft illegal contact penalty.

Then TJ Hendrickson drew a holding penalty to nullify a decent gain by Isiah Pacheco. Two plays later, Patrick Mahomes dropped back and came under pressure from Hendrickson, before lofting a soft pass in the direction of Xavier Worthy. Cam Taylor-Britt had tight coverage on the underthrown ball, but what happened next was exceptional. Worthy was waiting for the ball to drop into his hands when Taylor-Britt reached up with one hand to successfully make the interception.

"That was Odell Beckham-esque, except on the defensive side," said Tony Romo in the commentary booth. "That's a highlight reel for a long time."

The turnover preserved the Bengals' lead going into the final quarter, and for once it wasn't the defense's fault that the game slipped away from them – a fumble return for a touchdown on the ensuing drive turned the game in the Chiefs' favour.

© Getty Images

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CLEVELAND BROWNS

After a brief resurgence, the Browns appear to be in trouble again

Was there a more disappointing team in the NFL last year than the Cleveland Browns? Seemingly poised to step into the heavyweight division, they showed little fight on their way to a 1-6 start and then displayed no appetite to drag themselves up off the canvas.

The Deshaun Watson era is over and has to go down as one of the worst trades in NFL history considering how much was given up and how little was received in return. The Browns are doing a familiar dance – keeping head coach Kevin Stefanski but firing the offensive coordinator – but it would be no surprise to see Stefanski's tenure end if things don't improve markedly this season.

How that might happen is not clear. The Browns are adrift, and their decision-making appears eccentric. In the draft, they were linked to Shedeur Sanders, but passed on him time after time, even drafting another quarterback, Oregon's Dillon Gabriel, in the third round. Then they drafted Sanders anyway, in the fifth. And this comes after bringing in ancient journeyman Joe Flacco in free agency – they will go into the new season with one of the most unsettled quarterback rooms in the game.

Then they engaged in a protracted standoff with their only true star player, Myles Garrett, who has clearly had enough of Cleveland. Instead of getting some extra draft capital from a trade, they instead showered Garrett with money ($160 million over four years), to keep a disgruntled 29-year-old on a team that is clearly rebuilding.

The draft brought hope for the defense in the form of defensive tackle Mason Graham and linebacker Carson Schwesinger, but the best move was acquiring an extra first-round pick next year in a trade.

> "The Browns will go into the new season with one of the most unsettled quarterback rooms in the game"

ESTABLISHED **1944**

HEAD COACH **KEVIN STEFANSKI**

STADIUM **HUNTINGTON BANK FIELD**

DIVISION **AFC NORTH**

RIVALS **CINCINNATI BENGALS**

2024 RECORD **3-14**

2025 SCHEDULE **0.519**

★★ **HONOURS** ★★

DIVISION
1946, 1947, 1948, 1967, 1968, 1969, 1971, 1980, 1985, 1986, 1987, 1989

CONFERENCE
1950, 1951, 1952, 1953, 1954, 1955, 1957, 1964, 1965, 1968, 1969

LEAGUE
1946, 1947, 1948, 1949, 1950, 1954, 1955, 1964

© Getty Images

STAR PLAYER **JERRY JEUDY**

DOB: **24 APRIL 1999** POS: **WIDE RECEIVER** NO. **03**

The Browns can take some solace from a trade that definitely worked out – Jeudy was the team's best receiver in 2024 and will be again this year. He cracked the 1,000-yard barrier for the first time in his career and also caught a career-best 90 passes.

Jeudy had never lived up to expectations in Denver, and reportedly asked for a trade after the 2022 season. Quite how he excelled in Cleveland, with such mediocre quarterbacking from Watson and Jameis Winston, is a mystery. Worryingly, his best days (including a super nine-catch, 235-yard effort against his old team) came with Winston at quarterback, and he has now departed to the Giants. Jeudy will have a hard time matching his 2024 numbers with the quarterbacks on the roster now.

KEY PERSONNEL

GRANT DELPIT
SAFETY

© Getty Images

Delpit was a bright spot on the Browns' defense. He failed to grab an interception for the first time in his career, but he was in on 111 tackles (and tackling was considered an issue when he came out of college). He has also shown durability (16 starts last year), being able to play through injury.

MYLES GARRETT
DEFENSIVE END

© Getty Images

Garrett was as productive as ever last year (double-digit sacks for the seventh consecutive season), and he remains one of the best defenders in the game. Following his new contract, he is also one of the richest, but is his heart still in Cleveland? Browns fans will be desperately hoping it is.

DENZEL WARD
CORNERBACK

© Getty Images

Ward is one of the best cover men in the game and yet he tends to be overlooked because of the quality of the Browns team as a whole. He made the Pro Bowl for the fourth time in his career and he also led the league with 19 passes defended.

QUINSHON JUDKINS
RUNNING BACK

© Getty Images

The Browns badly need a productive back and their second-round draft pick will get every chance to contribute. He is a three-down player, with good pass-catching skills, but his main strength at the moment is his ability to break through tackles with power and acceleration to pick up extra yardage.

2024

HIGHLIGHT OF THE SEASON

It is always special when the snow starts to fall during a game. When Cleveland hosted the Steelers on Thursday night in Week 12, the snowflakes started to fall towards the end of the first half and by the fourth quarter the field was covered. The players looked like ghosts as they gave their primetime audience a game that just got better as the snow got heavier

Both teams picked up the pace in the fourth quarter. Jameis Winston scrambled for a two-yard score and added the two-point conversion to David Njoku to put the Browns up 18-6, but Pittsburgh came back with two scores to take a one-point lead. With the ground game struggling due to the poor footing, Cleveland turned their offense over to Winston, and although he tossed up an interception, he also made enough completions to keep a final drive alive. Nick Chubb went over from two yards out to take the lead again and this time the Browns held on for their third (and also final) win of the season.

© Getty Images

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PITTSBURGH STEELERS

Quarterback remains the big question mark on a team that appears to be slipping towards mediocrity

The Steelers hoped to come out of the 2024 season with a clear idea of who their starting quarterback would be going forward. Russell Wilson and Justin Fields would each be given a chance to grab the job and the team would sign up the one who performed the best.

In the early going, it looked like Pittsburgh had an embarrassment of riches under center – Fields started the season with a 4-2 record but was then controversially benched for Wilson, who won his first four starts, throwing six touchdowns and also two interceptions.

Somehow, from this promising position, the wheels fell off the season. The offense stalled, the defense wore down, and a four-game losing streak almost ended the team's playoff hopes. Both quarterbacks have since moved on, unhappy with how the situation was handled, and now the Steelers are back where they started at quarterback, only with fewer options. Mason Rudolph looks like the starter going into 2025, having previously spent four lacklustre seasons in Pittsburgh before a brief spell with the Titans.

The offensive line has lost its starting left tackle, with Dan Moore getting a surprisingly big payday from the Titans, and running back Najee Harris has jumped ship to the Chargers.

The Steelers chose to inject some talent to a tired defense by drafting defensive lineman Derrick Harmon with their first-round pick. Harmon is a nice selection and should step in when Cam Heyward finally bows out, but there were bigger holes elsewhere.

The overall impression is that this is a team without an identity and it does not look like they have the players to establish one this year. It seems that head coach Mike Tomlin could be in for a torrid season.

> "The Steelers are back where they started at quarterback, only with fewer options"

ESTABLISHED **1933**

HEAD COACH **MIKE TOMLIN**

STADIUM **ACRISURE STADIUM**

DIVISION **AFC NORTH**

RIVALS **BALTIMORE RAVENS**

2024 RECORD **10-7**

2025 SCHEDULE **0.526**

★★ HONOURS ★★

DIVISION

1972, 1974, 1975, 1976, 1977, 1978, 1979, 1983, 1984, 1992, 1994, 1995, 1996, 1997, 2001, 2002, 2004, 2007, 2008, 2010, 2014, 2016, 2017, 2020

CONFERENCE

1974, 1975, 1978, 1979, 1995, 2005, 2008, 2010

LEAGUE

1974, 1975, 1978, 1979, 2005, 2008

© Getty Images

STAR PLAYER **TJ WATT**

DOB: **11 OCTOBER 1994** POS: **OUTSIDE LINEBACKER** NO. **90**

★ **It was a down year for the former Defensive Player of the Year, but TJ Watt still remains the best player on the Steelers' roster – he was even voted by his teammates as the 2024 Steelers MVP.** Watt suffered from frequent double-teams, blocking schemes specifically designed to nullify him and also the inability of referees to call holding penalties on him (a trait throughout the league as offenses are allowed to get away with murder in the name of more 'exciting' games).

The Steelers badly need Watt to bounce back to his old self, but it is a testament to his greatness that 11.5 sacks, six forced fumbles, 27 quarterback hits and 19 tackles for loss (his 2024 output) is considered disappointing. Is age catching up with him, or will he bounce back as strong as ever in 2025? Of course, the Steelers defense is praying it is the latter.

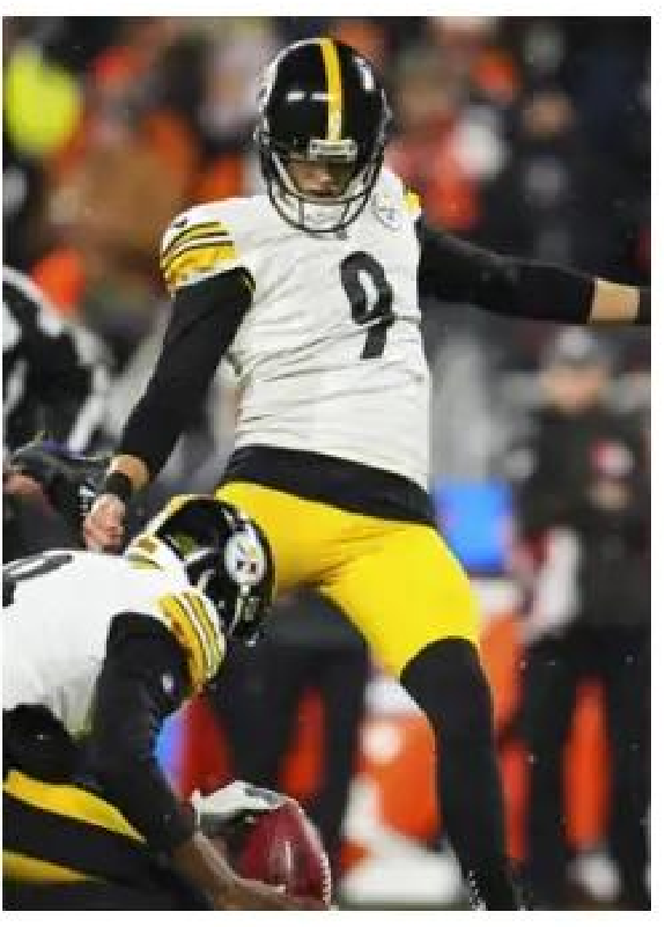
KEY PERSONNEL

KALEB JOHNSON
RUNNING BACK

© Getty Images

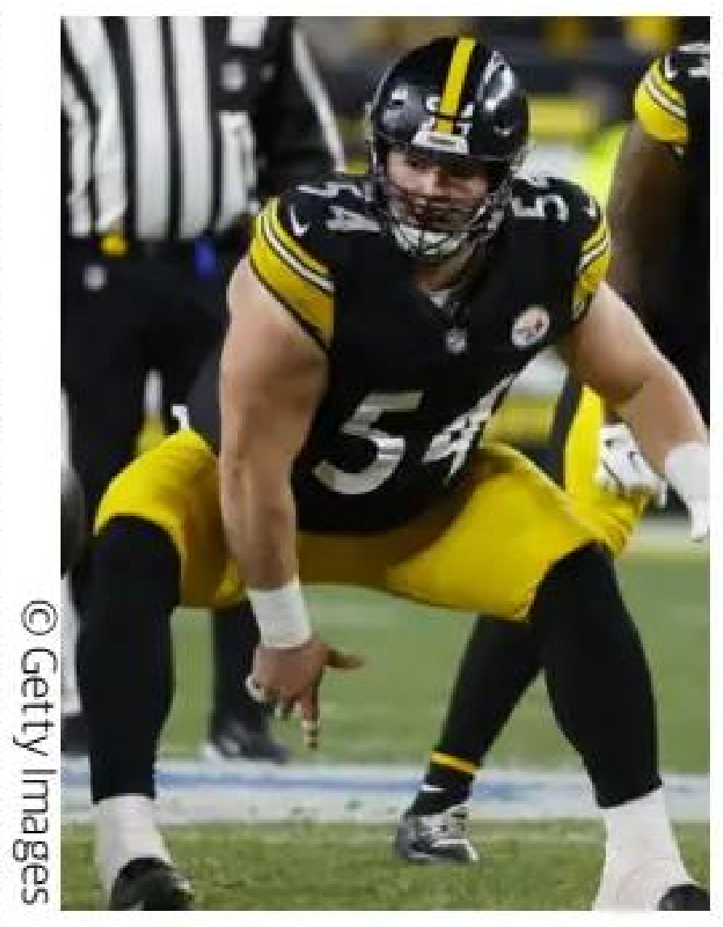
With the departure of workhorse running back Najee Harris (four straight 1,000-yard seasons), Johnson will be given a chance to establish himself in the Steelers backfield. A big, physical threat, he has home-run ability and is also expected to perform well as a pass receiver.

CHRIS BOSWELL
KICKER


© Getty Images

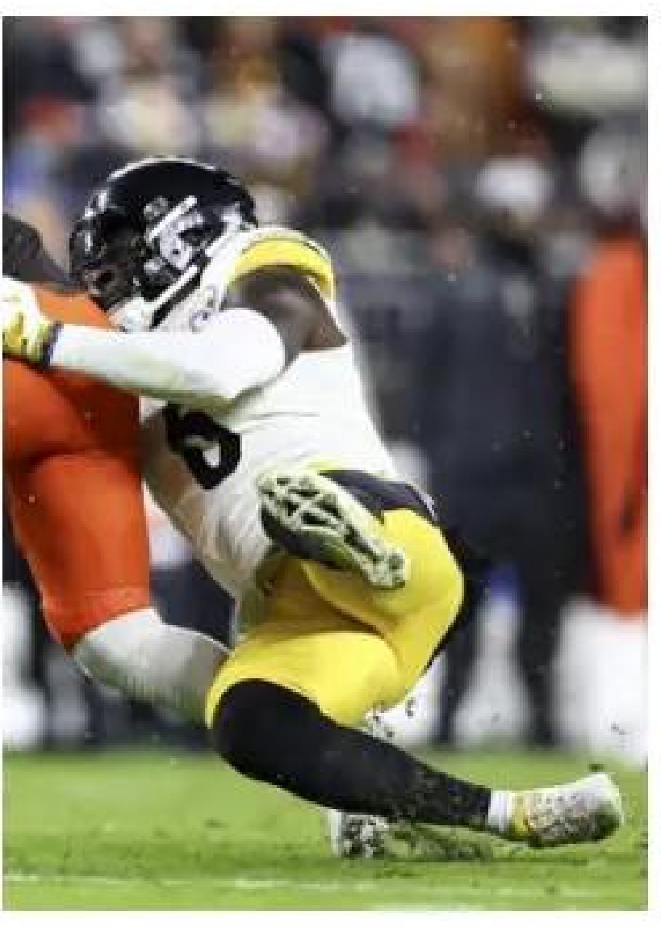
Kickers don't usually get much love, but Boswell enjoyed another great year in 2024. He connected on better than 90 per cent of his field goal attempts for the seventh time in his ten-year career. He was exceptional on longer-range kicks, nailing 13 of 15 attempts, and also succeeded with all 35 extra points.

ZACH FRAZIER
CENTER


© Getty Images

Pittsburgh has a tradition of excellence at center, with Mike Webster, Dermontti Dawson and Maurkice Pouncey leading the way. It's early in his career, but Frazier showed signs of being the team's next great center after an excellent rookie season, in which he gave up just 15 quarterback pressures in his 15 starts.

PATRICK QUEEN
LINEBACKER


© Getty Images

Queen gave the Steelers exactly what they were expecting after bringing him in as a free agent last season. His 129 combined tackles led the team and he started every game – just as he had in his four seasons with Baltimore. Not a hugely flashy player, he is a dependable cog in the Pitt defense.

2024

HIGHLIGHT OF THE SEASON

One of the most eye-catching plays of the Steelers' season showcased their offensive line depth and the explosiveness of a player they may well miss next season. On a tough inside run, rookie center Zach Frazier suffered a leg injury and was taken to the medical tent for examination. On the very next play, with Ryan McCollum stepping in at center, Najee Harris took the handoff from Justin Fields and started to move towards the left sideline.

The Raiders defense pursued but was brilliantly screened by the offensive line, with McCollum in particular doing a great job on Raiders defensive tackle John Jenkins. With McCollum remaining engaged on Jenkins, Harris was able to find his way through traffic and then explode down the left sideline before leaping into the end zone for an epic touchdown – and his first of the season.

"Look at him go Superman there," enthused commentator Charles Davis after watching Harris take off from the five-yard line to avoid a would-be tackler. After a lengthy review it was confirmed that the Steelers had scored their first rushing touchdown of the season by a running back.

© Getty Images

© Getty Images

HOUSTON TEXANS

Work is needed if the Texans are not to slip back into the pack in the AFC South

The Texans gave their fans a feeling of déjà vu in 2024. Just like in 2023 they compiled a 10-7 record, just like in 2023 they won the AFC South, and just like in 2023 they won a Wild Card playoff game and were then eliminated in the divisional round. The reason for the lack of progress was clear. The offense underperformed, largely due to an ineffective offensive line. Quarterback CJ Stroud was good, but fell some way short of his rookie heroics. This was due partly to the offensive line problems and partly to a struggling receiver corps. Tank Dell failed to progress after a promising rookie campaign and a season-ending knee injury, Nico Collins took a step backwards and Stefon Diggs was a disappointment.

There were flashes of brightness on offense (Joe Mixon had a great year after joining in free agency), but work needs to be done. The good news is that the team recognises this and has begun a complete overhaul of the offensive line. Laremy Tunsil, Shaq Mason and Kenyon Green are out, as is offensive line coach Chris Strausser. Free-agent acquisitions Cam Robinson and Laken Tomlinson will slide in at left tackle and guard, with draftee Aireontae Ersery offering hope for the future.

The defense needs no such overhaul, boasting the most productive edge pairing in the game – Will Anderson Jr and Danielle Hunter led the league (including playoff games) with a combined 148 pressures and 26.5 sacks.

At linebacker, Azeez Al-Shaair and Christian Harris are bursting with potential, but injury and suspension kept them apart for large chunks of last season. If they stay on the field this year the defense could step up another notch.

> "The offense underperformed in 2024, largely due to an ineffective offensive line"

ESTABLISHED **1999**

HEAD COACH **DEMECO RYANS**

STADIUM **NRG STADIUM**

DIVISION **AFC SOUTH**

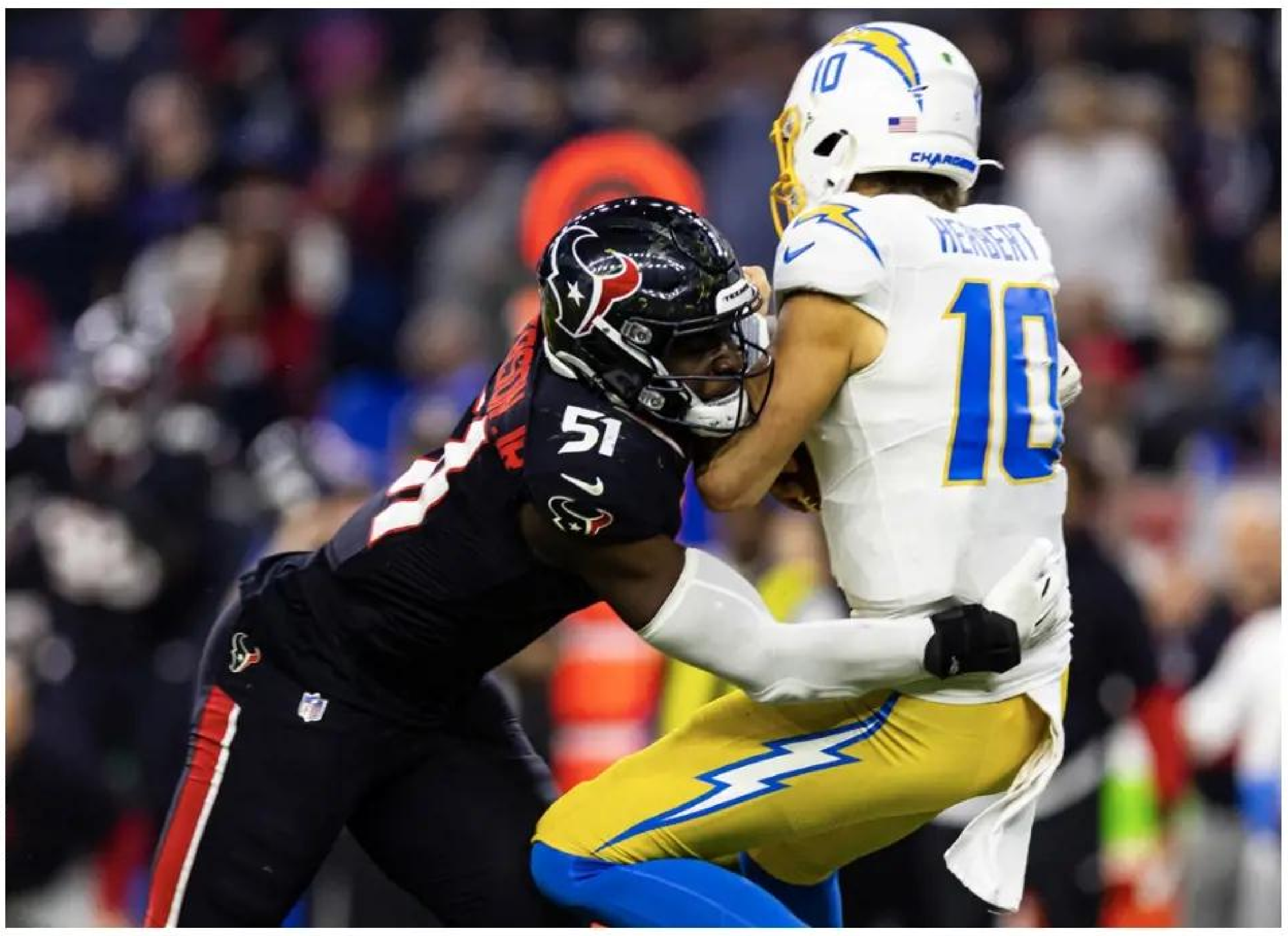
RIVALS **INDIANAPOLIS COLTS**

2024 RECORD **10-7**

2025 SCHEDULE **0.481**

★★ **HONOURS** ★★

DIVISION
2011, 2012, 2015, 2016,
2018, 2019, 2023, 2024


© Getty Images

STAR PLAYER **WILL ANDERSON JR**

DOB: **2 SEPTEMBER 2001** POS: **DEFENSIVE END** NO. **51**

★ **Seven sacks and ten tackles for loss led to Anderson being named Defensive Rookie of the Year in 2023.** Last year he turned the dial up even more to register 11 sacks and 16 tackles for loss, teaming up with Danielle Hunter to give the Texans a lethal pair of disruptors off the wings.

Already a player that opposing coordinators have to account for, Anderson's commitment to improving is clear to see – he tried new moves and new techniques last year, all under the watchful (and approving) eye of defensive-minded head coach DeMeco Ryans.

"As a rusher, one thing you love is getting sacks," Williams explained, when asked about his step up in play last year, "but it's so much more than just getting sacks… affecting the quarterback can come in various ways."

KEY PERSONNEL

CJ STROUD
QUARTERBACK

© Getty Images

Stroud endured a bit of a sophomore slump last season, but with a revamped offensive line, a new coordinator and an exciting pair of draftee receivers in Jayden Higgins and Jaylin Noel (both fresh out of Iowa State), there is reason to expect a rebound season in 2025.

DANIELLE HUNTER
DEFENSIVE END

© Getty Images

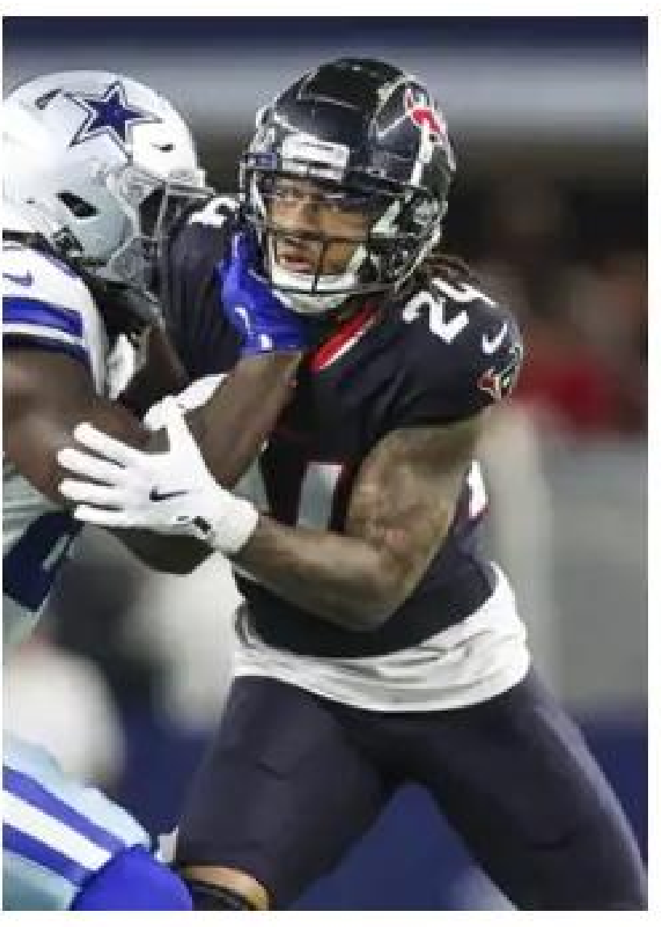
In his first season with Houston, Hunter delivered exactly what the team was hoping for. Together with Will Anderson Jr, he formed a partnership that is as good as any in the league, with each benefitting from the attention drawn by the other. The Texans can confidently expect another double-digit sack tally in 2025.

JOE MIXON
RUNNING BACK

© Getty Images

The Texans needed a more consistent ground threat, and Mixon gave them exactly what they hoped for when adding him in free agency. Despite only playing in 14 games, he rushed for 1,016 yards and 11 touchdowns and was productive as a receiver too, with 36 catches for 309 yards.

DEREK STINGLEY JR
CORNERBACK


© Getty Images

Stingley stayed healthy for the first time in his career and the results were clear. After missing a total of 14 games in his first two years, he suited up every week in 2024 and delivered five interceptions while breaking up 18 passes. His performance saw him voted to the Pro Bowl for the first time.

2024

HIGHLIGHT OF THE SEASON

In the Wild Card round, Houston found themselves taking on a dangerous Chargers team, but their defense was up to the challenge. Mario Edwards, Will Anderson Jr and Denico Autry all chipped in with sacks, but it was the defensive backfield that really applied the heat.

With the Texans offense struggling early, the defense held the fort, forcing the Chargers to settle for field goals. Then, attempting to force the pace, Justin Herbert threw deep for Quentin Johnston and was intercepted by Kamari Lassiter.

In the third quarter, he was picked off again, with Eric Murray returning the ball 38 yards for a touchdown. Herbert's third interception, this time by Derek Stingley Jr, came on the next drive and Stingley repeated the feat as Herbert became desperate deep into the final period.

Herbert, who threw just three interceptions during the entire regular season, had been picked off four times in one game.

"This is going to go down as an unforgettable defensive performance by the Houston Texans," said Ian Eagle after watching the powerful Chargers implode.

© Getty Images

PATRIOTS
PEPPERS
5
56
PHARMS JR
98

© Getty Images

INDIANAPOLIS COLTS

The Colts are praying Anthony Richardson grabs what might be his final chance

It's fair to say that the second year of the Anthony Richardson era did not go as planned, and the era could come to a shockingly early conclusion if things don't improve this year. Richardson was not terrible in 2024 – his rushing was a threat and he had moments of brilliant play, but the consistency wasn't there and he once more missed games through injury.

The inconsistency under center was especially disappointing given the return to form of Jonathan Taylor, who gave the Colts a powerful ground game on which to build an offense. They also had a deep and complementary stable of receivers. In fact, the Colts were the only team to have three wideouts catch passes for more than 800 yards, and the addition of tight end Tyler Warren via the draft gives Richardson another dependable target.

But while Richardson and the offense attracted the attention, the biggest problem may have been a woeful defense that ranked near the bottom of the league in both rush and pass defense. Laiatu Latu made progress but did not have the kind of immediate impact his pre-draft hype had suggested, and the team has brought in another draftee, JT Tuimoloau, to add more bite to the pass-rush.

In free agency, a suspect secondary was addressed. Big contracts were handed out to safety Camryn Bynum and cornerback Charvarius Ward, but the eye-catching acquisition was quarterback Daniel Jones. He is only here on a one-year deal, but the Colts are paying $14 million for that year. If Richardson struggles, or if he goes down to the injury bug again, Jones will get a chance to make a move on the starting position.

> "While Anthony Richardson and the offense attracted the attention, the biggest problem may have been a woeful defense"

ESTABLISHED **1953**
HEAD COACH **SHANE STEICHEN**
STADIUM **LUCAS OIL STADIUM**
DIVISION **AFC SOUTH**
RIVALS **HOUSTON TEXANS**
2024 RECORD **8-9**
2025 SCHEDULE **0.464**

★★ **HONOURS** ★★

DIVISION
1968, 1970, 1975, 1976, 1977, 1987, 1999, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2009, 2010, 2013, 2014

CONFERENCE
1958, 1959, 1964, 1968, 1970, 2006, 2009

LEAGUE
1958, 1959, 1968, 1970, 2006

© Getty Images

STAR PLAYER **JONATHAN TAYLOR**

DOB: **19 JANUARY 1999** POS: **RUNNING BACK** NO. **28**

★ **Taylor had turned in two quiet seasons since his electrifying 2021 campaign, but he was close to his best in 2024.** It was a timely revival, because in many ways Taylor was the Colts offense last year – it is difficult to imagine how they would have functioned without him.

He averaged better than 100 yards in his 14 appearances and had four big games at the end of the season as the Colts fought for a playoff berth. Recognising that he was their only hope, the coaching staff gave him an ever-increasing number of carries over the four games and he responded with 627 yards and six touchdowns. Still only 26, he will remain the focal point of the Colts' offense this coming season, but they must guard against overworking him.

KEY PERSONNEL

ZAIRE FRANKLIN
LINEBACKER

© Getty Images

Franklin waited seven years before making his first Pro Bowl, but it's difficult to keep on ignoring a man who has averaged more than 170 tackles over the last three seasons. He isn't a flashy player, but he added 11 tackles for loss and 3.5 sacks in his best pro season so far.

LAIATU LATU
DEFENSIVE END

© Getty Images

The Colts wanted to ease Latu in as a situational pass-rusher, but injuries on the line meant he got more playing time and he steadily improved as the year progressed. His sack total was modest (just four) but his 38 pressures showed he was bringing the heat.

JOSH DOWNS
WIDE RECEIVER

© Getty Images

Playing out of the slot, Downs is the epitome of a possession receiver. In his second season he turned in almost identical numbers to his rookie year, but improved in first downs receiving, moving the chains on 40 of his 72 receptions. That number led the team.

CAMRYN BYNUM
SAFETY

© Getty Images

Bynum brings talent, energy and personality to the Colts secondary – his choreographed celebrations often go viral. That should not detract from the fact that he is a ball-hawking safety who was durable enough to start all 17 games for three straight seasons with the Vikings.

2024

HIGHLIGHT OF THE SEASON

Colts fans might be on edge about the future of Anthony Richardson, but he had enough highlights in 2024 to keep hope alive. His Week 1 performance against Houston was typical of the feast-or-famine performance that he displayed over the season – he only completed nine passes, but three of them were deep strikes and two went for touchdowns.

On the Colts' second possession of the season he showcased his ability. On a 1st and 10 play, he faked a handoff to Jonathan Taylor, dropped back and looked downfield. Under pressure, he slipped and then had to drift left to buy time. He therefore threw while off balance, yet still fired the ball almost 70 yards to Alec Pierce, who caught the pinpoint pass and ran into the end zone for a 60-yard score.

The incredible display of arm strength drew gasps of admiration from fans and announcers alike, but he wasn't done for the day. In the fourth quarter he hit Ashton Dulin for a 54-yard touchdown and then found Pierce again, this time for 57 yards, as the Colts fought down to the wire in a game they lost by just two points.

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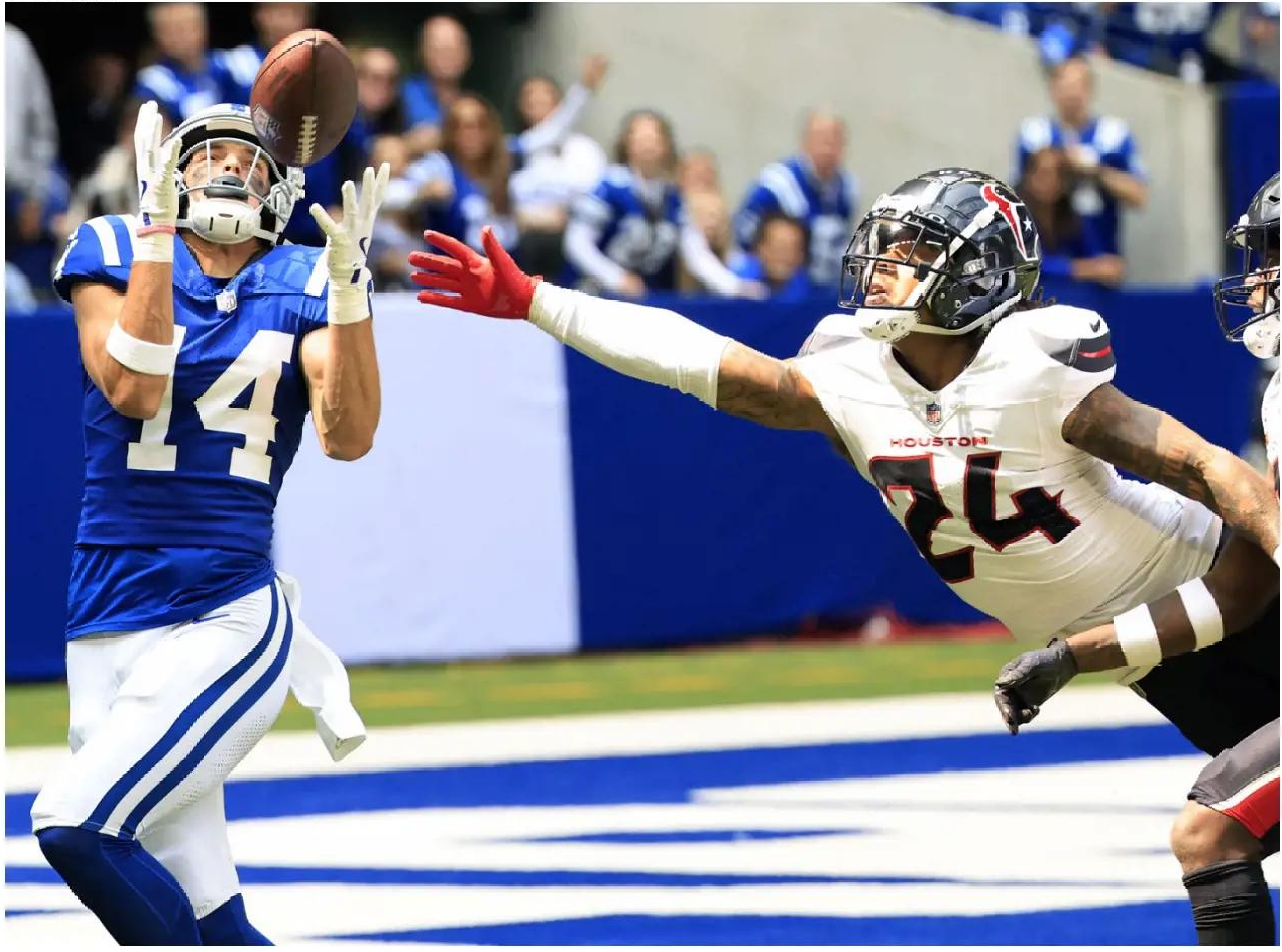

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JACKSONVILLE JAGUARS

The Jags are praying that Trevor Lawrence can turn his career around

The Jags came into 2024 with reasonable hopes, having narrowly missed out on the playoffs the previous year. Instead of making progress, however, they fell all the way back to square one. Well, perhaps not quite square one, because they still have hope for Trevor Lawrence – but that hope has now been tempered by another disappointing campaign.

In some respects, the Jags were close. They lost ten games by single-score margins, and that was often because they couldn't hang on to leads. Four times the defense surrendered a fourth-quarter advantage, and they allowed over 400 yards of offense nine times. Their pass coverage was especially abysmal, allowing 257.4 yards per game and giving up a quarterback rating of 101.76.

The changing coaching staff (Liam Coen, Grant Udinski and Anthony Campanile come in as head coach, offensive coordinator and defensive coordinator) is more cause for hope, but Lawrence will go into his fifth season with his third head coach (not counting the short interim run of Darrell Bevell) and third offensive coordinator. That is not the best way to develop a quarterback.

As is usual with the Jags, money has been splashed in free agency. Patrick Mekari and Robert Hainsey should bolster the interior offensive line, but Jourdan Lewis and Eric Murray, while bringing experience to the secondary, will both be over 30 when the season starts.

The Jags were lucky in the draft – needing help on both offense and defense, they got it with one player. Travis Hunter is one of the most intriguing players to come along in years, equally explosive as a wide receiver and as a cornerback. The Jags must avoid the temptation of asking him to play every snap.

> "Trevor Lawrence will go into his fifth season with his third head coach and third offensive coordinator"

ESTABLISHED **1993**

HEAD COACH **LIAM COEN**

STADIUM **EVERBANK STADIUM**

DIVISION **AFC SOUTH**

RIVALS **TENNESSEE TITANS**

2024 RECORD **4-13**

2025 SCHEDULE **0.467**

★★ **HONOURS** ★★

DIVISION

1998, 1999, 2017, 2022

© Getty Images

STAR PLAYER **BRIAN THOMAS**

DOB: **8 OCTOBER 2002** POS: **WIDE RECEIVER** NO. **7**

★ Only six players before Thomas had amassed 1,200 receiving yards and ten touchdowns in their rookie season, and to accomplish this on a team with such a paucity of other weapons, not to mention poor quarterbacking, was little short of a miracle.

Jacksonville managed 16 pass plays of 30 or more yards, and Thomas caught ten of them. Even in a draft class featuring Jayden Daniels, Bo Nix and Brock Bowers, Thomas received votes for the NFL Offensive Rookie of the Year Award.

For a rookie, his consistency was exceptional. He caught at least two passes in every game and by the end of the year he was clicking with journeyman Mac Jones, going over 100 yards in three of the last four contests. If Lawrence develops, Thomas should become a superstar.

KEY PERSONNEL

TRAVIS HUNTER

WIDE RECEIVER/ CORNERBACK

© Getty Images

Needing help on both sides of the ball, Jacksonville got it in one unique package. Hunter would have been a first-round draft pick as a receiver or a cornerback – the trick for the Jags will be maximising his potential without running him into the ground.

'TANK' BIGSBY

RUNNING BACK

© Getty Images

Cartavious Bigsby is a pretty good name, but 'Tank' suits him better after a second pro season that saw him well and truly arrive. He ran over opponents for 766 yards and seven touchdowns (despite making just one start all year) and eclipsed former first-rounder Travis Etienne in the process.

TREVOR LAWRENCE

QUARTERBACK

© Getty Images

Lawrence remains the starter for now, but with another new coordinator to get used to, the odds are starting to stack up against him. The impact made by Brian Thomas and the addition of Travis Hunter give genuine hope, and with no notable alternative on the roster, Lawrence is still the main man going into the new season.

CAM LITTLE

KICKER

© Getty Images

Yes, the kicker was one of the bright spots of this team. Little had a great rookie season, connecting on 93.1 per cent of his field goals, all of his extra points, and getting a touchback on 67 of his 77 kickoffs. It was part of an overall great performance by the special teams.

2024

HIGHLIGHT OF THE SEASON

Jacksonville may have struggled on both sides of the ball, but their special teams were consistently special, so it is only fair to turn the spotlight on them for the highlight play of the year. In Week 7, with the Jags trying to dig themselves out their early hole, they came up against the struggling New England Patriots and knew that nothing less than a win would do.

After falling behind 10-0, Brian Thomas and Tank Bigsby responded to give Jacksonville a four-point lead. The defense then held and New England punted with less than two minutes to play in the first half.

The punt was a big one, forcing Parker Washington to retreat inside his five-yard line. Most expected him to let the ball bounce into the end zone, but instead he fielded it at the four, ran to his left to avoid a tackler and then cut upfield. His pace took him through the coverage and he passed the punter before reaching the halfway line. After cruising the rest of the way he made the 'Nestea plunge' into the end zone for a stunning 96-yard score.

© Getty Images

TITANS
55
41

© Getty Images

TENNESSEE TITANS

The Titans are starting almost from scratch, with the overall No.1 draft pick

As expected when Derrick Henry was let go, the Titans became a team without an identity. That was reinforced when Will Levis failed to make any strides in his second year and the Titans finished the year as the 26th-ranked team in terms of offensive yardage.

Turnovers were a big problem for the Titans, as they coughed the ball up 34 times, and things did not improve when Mason Rudolph was given a chance under center. About the only bright spots on offense were Tony Pollard (whose 1,079 rushing yards were perfectly respectable as long as you didn't glance over to Baltimore, where Henry was rushing for almost 900 more) and Calvin Ridley, who turned a modest 64 receptions into 1,017 yards.

Hampered by a ton of dead cap money, the team has been forced into a full rebuild around a new quarterback. That quarterback is overall No.1 draft pick Cam Ward, so there is reason for hope, but it is difficult to see Ward being good enough as a rookie to lift his new team out of the basement in the AFC South. He will go to work with a new left tackle protecting his blind side, as the Titans made their biggest move in free agency on 315-pound offensive tackle Dan Moore, from the Pittsburgh Steelers.

For the second year in a row, Tennessee have lost their leading pass-rusher in free agency. Last year it was Denico Autry, this time around it was Harold Landry. Just as Ward is the designated saviour on offense, so Oluwafemi Oladejo will be asked to breathe new life into the pass-rush. Third-round safety Kevin Winston Jr needs to stay healthy, but he has the talent to become a leader in the secondary.

> "About the only bright spots on offense were Tony Pollard and Calvin Ridley"

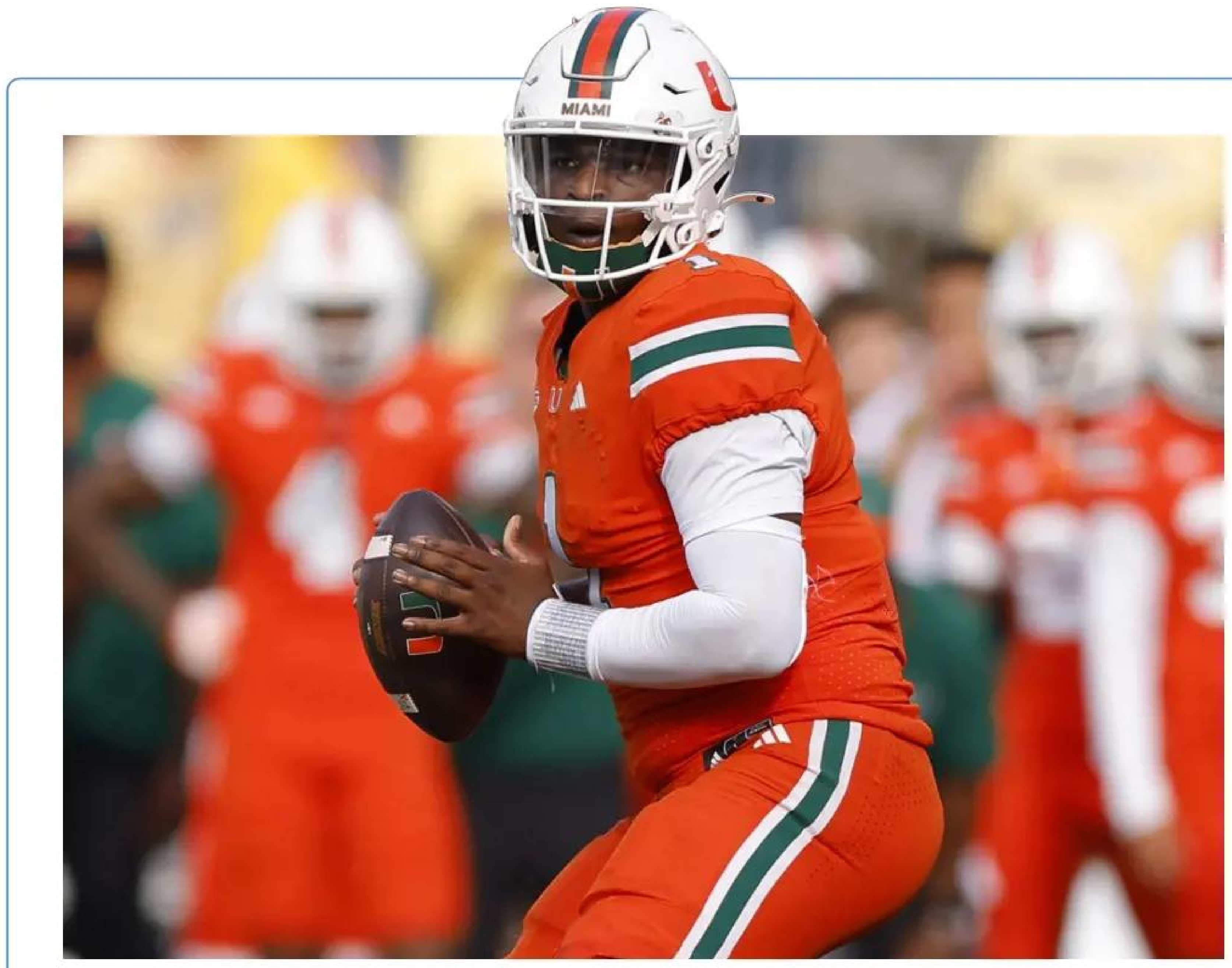
ESTABLISHED **1959**
HEAD COACH **BRIAN CALLAHAN**
STADIUM **NISSAN STADIUM**
DIVISION **AFC SOUTH**
RIVALS **HOUSTON TEXANS**
2024 RECORD **3-14**
2025 SCHEDULE **0.450**

★★ HONOURS ★★

DIVISION
1960, 1961, 1962, 1967, 1991, 1993, 2000, 2002, 2008, 2020, 2021

CONFERENCE
1999

LEAGUE
1960, 1961



STAR PLAYER **CAM WARD**

DOB: **25 MAY 2002** POS: **QUARTERBACK** NO. **1**

Ward comes to the Titans with more experience than the average rookie. He has played five seasons of college ball, for three different programs, and his career has been the definition of a slow-burner. From a run-heavy Wing-T offense in high school, he started his college career at an FCS school, the University of Incarnate Word (be honest, had you ever heard of them?). He followed his coach, Eric Morris, to Washington State for two more seasons, and finally played a year at Miami in 2024. With the Hurricanes, he broke out, passing for 4,313 yards and 39 touchdowns thanks to his excellent balance and top-tier arm strength. Tennessee (hopefully) won't ask him to do everything immediately, but as the top pick, the pressure is already on to get this drifting franchise back on course.

KEY PERSONNEL

TONY POLLARD
RUNNING BACK

Pollard is the kind of free agent general managers love. The Titans liked his productivity with the Cowboys and he delivered almost exactly the same level of performance in Tennessee, and that was despite being slowed by ankle problems towards the end of the season.

CALVIN RIDLEY
WIDE RECEIVER

Ridley is not elite, but he is the best target available for new quarterback Cam Ward, and he had an excellent average of 15.9 yards last year. Less impressive was his frankly poor 53.3 per cent catch rate, but with Titans quarterbacks forcing the ball to him by virtue of having no viable options, that figure was skewed.

DAN MOORE
OFFENSIVE TACKLE

Moore is a vastly experienced tackle. Over the past four seasons only Penei Sewell and Jawaan Taylor have taken more offensive snaps than Moore's 4,109. His veteran savvy will be key to rebuilding a struggling line and keeping the ground game functioning, as well as protecting the franchise (aka Cam Ward).

JEFFERY SIMMONS
DEFENSIVE TACKLE

Simmons is one of the few bright spots on defense. More highly rated a few seasons ago, he still had an impactful season, starting 16 games and contributing five sacks, 11 tackles for loss and nine quarterback hits. On a rebuilding team, he remains young enough to build around.

© Getty Images

2024

HIGHLIGHT OF THE SEASON

T'Vondre Sweat was the Titans' second-round draft pick in 2024, and he came into the season with a few question marks – mostly surrounding his bulk. When commentators refer to you as 'the big man' in a league full of big men, you know you have to watch your weight, but Sweat turned in a solid rookie campaign, starting 16 games and making 51 tackles. His highlight play was one of the team's biggest plays of the year. Nursing a seven-point lead against the Bengals in Week 15, the defense prepared for a 2nd and goal play from their nine-yard line. Joe Burrow was forced to step up in the pocket and looked like he had taken a sack at the 12… but Sweat had picked his pocket at the last moment, taking off with the ball. A shimmy shook off one would-be tackler, a stiff-arm took care of a second, and he made it out to the 40-yard line before he was shoved out of bounds. The Titans were unable to hold on to their lead, but Sweat's play had given their fans something to smile about.

© Getty Images

DENVER BRONCOS

The Broncos have carefully targeted their weaknesses in a bid to continue their resurgence

Following the departure of Peyton Manning after the Broncos' 2015 Super Bowl triumph, it was expected that the team would take a while to reset. Few expected that reset to last nearly a decade, but a procession of uninspiring quarterbacks doomed Denver to losing records in all but one of the eight seasons following that Super Bowl.

Last year, with the arrival of Bo Nix, the franchise found its feet again. Considered a reach by many, Nix turned in a superb rookie campaign to push the Broncos back into the playoffs.

A sobering defeat at the hands of the Bills in the Wild Card round will not have dimmed expectations for this season, but there are reasons for caution – the Broncos got into the postseason on the back of a gimme win from the Chiefs, who were resting starters for their attempt at a three-peat. Denver grabbed their opportunity with both hands, delivering a 38-0 thrashing, but a full-strength Chiefs team might have extended the Broncos' playoff drought by another year.

Weak spots on the team were clear. They struggled to run the ball with authority and were below average on pass defense – so that is where offseason efforts have focused.

After four seasons where Javonte Williams teased but never quite delivered, the Broncos have moved on. They will miss his elite pass-protection skills, but they are hoping that second-round draft pick RJ Harvey will become the workhorse their backfield needs.

The defensive secondary, meanwhile, has been overhauled with the arrival of free-agent safety Talanoa Hufanga, who joins on a $39 million deal, and first-round cornerback Jahdae Barron.

> "A sobering defeat at the hands of the Bills in the Wild Card round will not have dimmed expectations for this season"

ESTABLISHED **1959**

HEAD COACH **SEAN PAYTON**

STADIUM **EMPOWER FIELD AT MILE HIGH**

DIVISION **AFC WEST**

RIVALS **LAS VEGAS RAIDERS**

2024 RECORD **10-7**

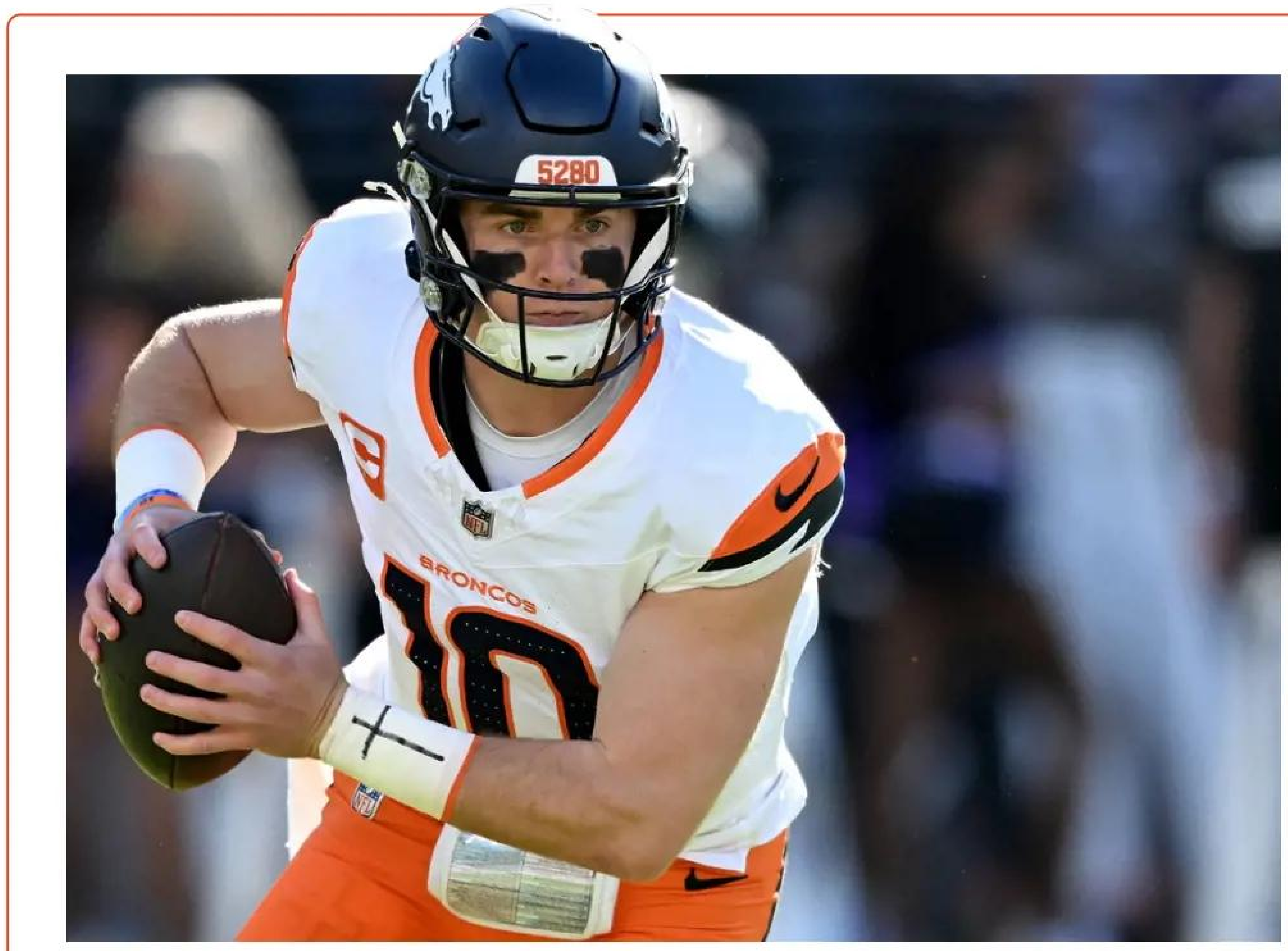
2025 SCHEDULE **0.505**

★★ **HONOURS** ★★

DIVISION
1977, 1978, 1984, 1986, 1987, 1989
1991, 1996, 1998, 2005, 2011, 2012,
2013, 2014, 2015

CONFERENCE
1977, 1986, 1987, 1989, 1997,
1998, 2013, 2015

LEAGUE
1997, 1998, 2015



STAR PLAYER **BO NIX**

DOB: **25 FEBRUARY 2000** POS: **QUARTERBACK** NO. **10**

★ **Going after weaknesses with such focus shows the Broncos front office knows what it is doing, but a lot of the hope for next season depends on Nix proving his rookie campaign was not a fluke.** He didn't have great targets (and Courtland Sutton was considered a trade possibility over the offseason), and things have not changed much, although the arrival of tight end Evan Engram gives him one more solid option.

Nix played with great poise, and his 66.3 per cent completion rate was impressive, as was his 29-12 touchdown-to-interception ratio. With his added rushing threat (430 yards and four TDs) he drew comparisons to former 49ers great Steve Young. If he continues to draw such comparisons the Broncos are set at QB for the foreseeable future.

KEY PERSONNEL

MARVIN MIMS

WIDE RECEIVER

Mims made solid progress in his second season and could emerge as a legitimate threat. His numbers (39 receptions for 503 yards and six scores) were not remarkable, but they were a significant uptick on his rookie year. Another jump of that magnitude could see him become a player to be feared.

NIK BONITTO

LINEBACKER

Bonitto continues his ascent to the upper echelons of the league – last year he recorded defensive touchdowns in back-to-back games and notched 13.5 sacks. In tandem with Jonathon Cooper (10.5 sacks) he gives the Broncos a great pair of wingmen for their linebacking corps.

PATRICK SURTAIN II

CORNERBACK

Quarterbacks are now so wary of Surtain that they mostly stay away from his side of the field, making his numbers rather pedestrian – four interceptions, 11 passes defended and just 45 combined tackles. But the league knows how good he is, hence his Defensive Player of the Year award.

ZACH ALLEN

DEFENSIVE END

Allen had a great year as a disruptor at the heart of the Broncos' defensive line. In six years as a pro, he has increased his number of quarterback hits every single year – last season he jumped from 24 to 40, leading the team in that category and adding a career-best 8.5 sacks.

© Getty Images

2024

HIGHLIGHT OF THE SEASON

The regular season finale against Kansas City may have had a slightly surreal atmosphere thanks to the Chiefs resting so many of their top players, but it still saw the Broncos secure their first playoff berth since 2015, and Bo Nix was at the top of his game, firing four touchdowns as the Broncos ran out 38-0 winners. A second-quarter touchdown was proof that the football gods were wearing Orange Crush throwback jerseys – on a 1st and goal, already leading 14-0, Nix took the snap, rolled out to his right to buy time, and fired a pass to the back of the end zone, intended for tight end Adam Trautman. Instead, the ball was tipped three times, by two Chiefs defenders, finally falling into the outstretched hands of Devaughn Vele, who snatched it and got a knee down inbounds for the score. Nix had opened the game with 17 straight completions to set a Broncos record, and Denver were headed for the playoffs. Perhaps the craziest thing about the play? Vele was wearing No. 17.

© Getty Images

KANSAS CITY CHIEFS

Only a three-peat will satisfy Chiefs fans as the NFL's latest dynasty rumbles on

A convincing argument could be made that the only thing that kept the Chiefs from winning five of the last six Super Bowls was their offensive line. Against the Buccaneers in 2020 and again against the Eagles last season, their offensive line crumpled in the Super Bowl and left Patrick Mahomes running for his life – he was sacked six times, the most he has even been sacked in a single game.

The downbeat (or should that be beatdown?) ending to the Chiefs' season overshadowed what was in many ways a remarkable effort. They became only the ninth team to win 15 games in a regular season, and they put together winning streaks of nine and six games in doing so.

But this did not feel like the Chiefs of old. The passing game, in particular, was a patchwork quilt of bit-part players – Travis Kelce saw a dip in form but still led the team with just 823 yards. Seven more players added at least 200 yards, but there was no clear No. 1 receiver to terrorise defenses. Perhaps a symptom of this (although some would argue it was the cause) was a down year from Mahomes, who failed to pass for 4,000 yards for the first time since his rookie season back in 2017.

Unsurprisingly, the Chiefs have made a serious effort to strengthen their offensive line – not only did they splash out more than $21 million in guaranteed money to San Francisco left tackle Jaylon Moore, they also drafted Ohio State tackle Josh Simmons in the first round of the draft. The lack of a true No. 1 receiving threat might be taken care of by the expected development of last year's top draft pick, Xavier Worthy, who flashed big-time ability (and blazing speed) in his rookie season – but only time will tell.

> "The Chiefs became only the ninth team to win 15 games in a regular season"

ESTABLISHED **1959**

HEAD COACH **ANDY REID**

STADIUM **ARROWHEAD STADIUM**

DIVISION **AFC WEST**

RIVALS **LAS VEGAS RAIDERS**

2024 RECORD **15-2**

2025 SCHEDULE **0.522**

★★ **HONOURS** ★★

DIVISION
1962, 1966, 1971, 1993, 1995, 1997, 2003, 2010, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024

CONFERENCE
2019, 2020, 2022, 2023, 2024

LEAGUE
1962, 1966, 1969, 2019, 2022, 2023

© Getty Images

STAR PLAYER **PATRICK MAHOMES**

DOB: **17 SEPTEMBER 1995** POS: **QUARTERBACK** NO. **15**

★ **Mahomes struggled early on in 2024, with interceptions coming thick and fast.** The lack of a top receiving threat and the turnstile at left tackle left him looking a shadow of his former self, yet he somehow adjusted and posted the best completion rate (67.5 per cent) of his career. He also threw 12 touchdowns and no interceptions in the six-game winning streak that saw the Chiefs reach 15 regular season victories. He remains mobile and elusive, and the threat with his legs, while modest compared to a quarterback like Lamar Jackson, is still very real. Even so, the Chiefs cannot continue to put their franchise player in harm's way, and if one of the two offensive tackles brought in can solidify that left tackle spot, we could see Mahomes getting back to his old self.

KEY PERSONNEL

GEORGE KARLAFTIS III

DEFENSIVE END

© Getty Images

Karlaftis has established himself as a valuable piece on the Chiefs' D-line. Though not in the superstar bracket, he can pressure the quarterback (eight sacks and 28 QB hits in 2024), knock down passes (five passes defended) and make impact plays (nine tackles for loss).

NICK BOLTON

LINEBACKER

© Getty Images

The Chiefs secured their leading tackler from last year when they re-signed Bolton to a three-year deal worth $45 million. Though undersized, at just 5'11", he is a thumper at the heart of the defense and, when healthy, can be counted on to rack up 100 tackles – the hope is that he can do the same in 2025.

XAVIER WORTHY

WIDE RECEIVER

© Getty Images

The Chiefs needed a spark on offense, but although Worthy produced good numbers (59 receptions and six touchdowns), his 10.8-yard average was disappointing for a man blessed with his speed. In the playoffs, he gave what Chiefs' fans are hoping was a taste of the future, averaging 15.1 yards on 19 catches.

TRENT MCDUFFIE

CORNERBACK

© Getty Images

The Chiefs have lost two key performers on defense in defensive tackle Tershawn Wharton and safety Justin Reid, so stability is badly needed from players like McDuffie. The team's best corner, he defended 13 passes last year and is coming into his prime as he enters his fourth season.

2024

HIGHLIGHT OF THE SEASON

Another season, another great Chiefs-Bills playoff encounter. The rivalry between these two teams goes all the way back to the AFL, as they were both charter members of that league in 1960 (the Chiefs were then known as the Dallas Texans). Going into the 2024 postseason they were on a collision course, having met three times over the previous four years.

Kansas City had prevailed on all three occasions, and things looked good for them as they staked out a 21-10 lead, but Buffalo came back and held a one-point edge going into the final quarter. When Mahomes scored on a ten-yard rush to retake the lead, coach Andy Reid made the gutsy call to go for a two-point conversion, which Mahomes duly converted with a pass to Justin Watson. Curtis Samuel's four-yard pass from Josh Allen therefore only tied the game, and the Chiefs were able to mount a calm, eight-play drive to grab the lead on a Harrison Butker field goal. The Kansas City defense then held to put the Chiefs one step closer to their dream of a three-peat.

© Getty Images

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LAS VEGAS RAIDERS

A strong offseason has breathed new life into a franchise that looked dead and buried

A dismal season, which included a ten-game losing streak, cost Antonio Pierce his head-coaching position and seemed to have doomed Raiders fans to more misery in the future. This was a team that looked rudderless and almost totally lacking in star power.

The departure of Davante Adams midway through the year seemed to signal the running up of the white flag, but things have turned around following an impressive offseason and Silver and Black fans can once more look ahead to a new season with some reasons for optimism.

The addition of Geno Smith should solidify the quarterback position for a while, and he is coming off his second 4,000-yard campaign in the last three years. He will be reunited with Pete Carroll, who returns to the NFL after a one-year absence.

As usual, a new head man means two new coordinators – in this case Chip Kelly (offense) and Patrick Graham (defense). The Raiders will be doing things differently this year, and a turnaround could come quicker than expected, especially following an eye-catching draft.

It is always dangerous to pin too many hopes on a draft class, but the Raiders look like they have added some game-breaking talent with their top three picks, and some solid depth later on. First-rounder Ashton Jeanty fills a huge need (Alexander Mattison led the team with just 420 rushing yards last year and departed during the offseason), while Jack Bech brings grit to a wide receiver stable that badly needs it. Three third-rounders (a corner and a pair of offensive tackles) were also highly touted.

> “Silver and Black fans can once more look ahead to a new season with some reasons for optimism”

ESTABLISHED **1960**

HEAD COACH **PETE CARROLL**

STADIUM **ALLEGIANT STADIUM**

DIVISION **AFC WEST**

RIVALS
KANSAS CITY CHIEFS

2024 RECORD **4-13**

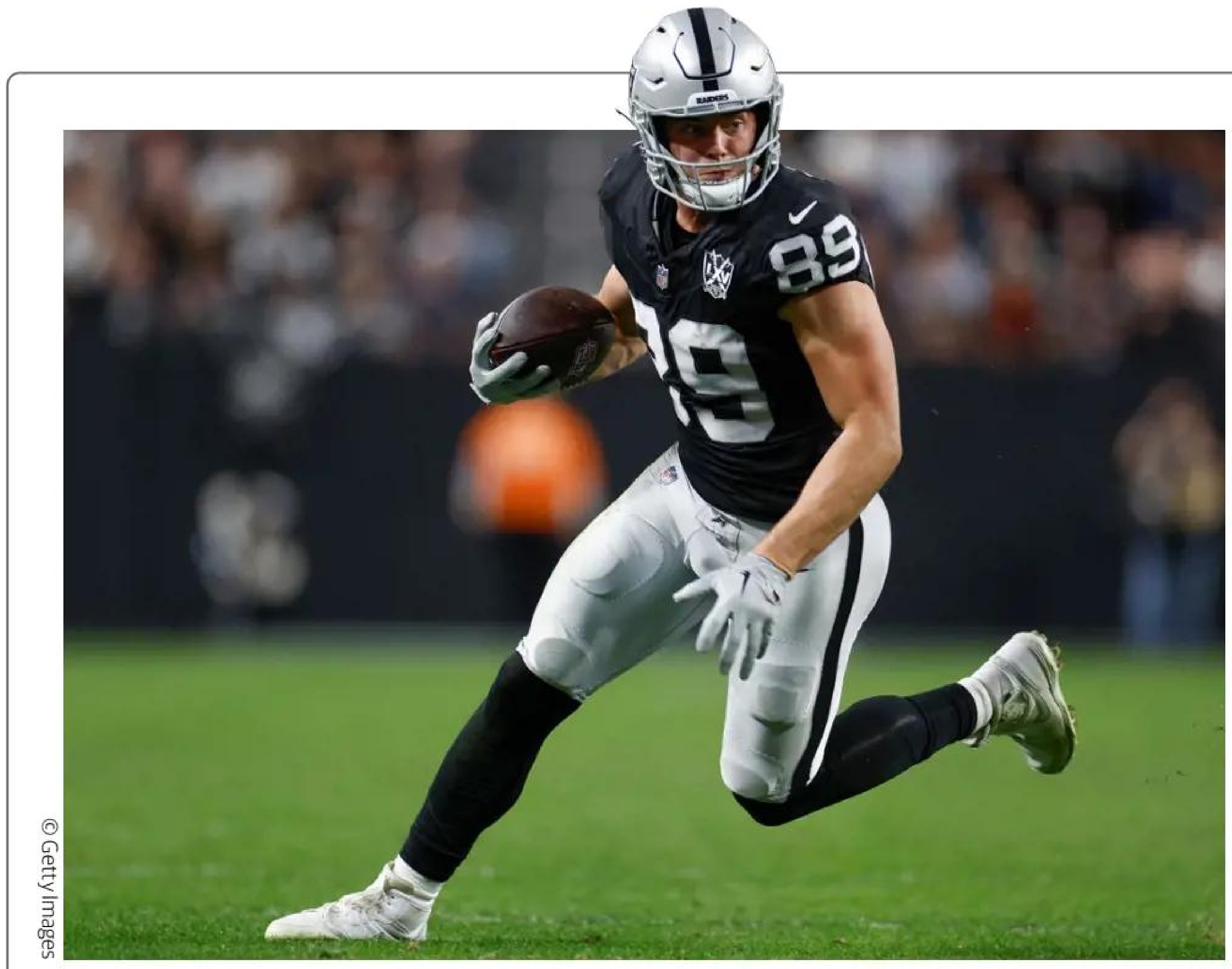
2025 SCHEDULE **0.502**

★ ★ **HONOURS** ★ ★

DIVISION
1967, 1968, 1969, 1970, 1972, 1973, 1974, 1975, 1976, 1983, 1985, 1990, 2000, 2001, 2002

CONFERENCE
1976, 1980, 1983, 2002

LEAGUE
1967, 1976, 1980, 1983



© Getty Images

STAR PLAYER **BROCK BOWERS**

DOB: **13 DECEMBER 2002** POS: **TIGHT END** NO. **89**

★ **Going into his second pro campaign, Bowers is the best player on the Raiders' offense and one of the brightest young stars in the league.** An incredible 112 catches in his rookie year, good for 1,194 yards, established him as one of the best tight ends in the game.

He was amazingly consistent – rookies often disappear for stretches of the season, especially towards the end of the year, but he caught passes in every game and enjoyed two monster outings (13 catches for 126 yards against Miami and ten for 140 against Kansas City).

It's difficult to see how he could get much better, but the Raiders will be more than happy with a repeat performance and he is sure to be Geno Smith's new best friend.

KEY PERSONNEL

JAKOBI MEYERS

WIDE RECEIVER

© Getty Images

Meyers was having a lacklustre campaign until the Raiders traded away Davante Adams. After that, he blossomed, enjoying three 100-yard days in the final ten games and catching 62 passes over that span. He goes into the new season as the undisputed No. 1 wideout on the team.

ASHTON JEANTY

RUNNING BACK

© Getty Images

Running backs are creeping their way back into fashion, and Jeanty was the highest-drafted back in seven years after the Raiders grabbed him with the sixth overall pick. He is a powerful, dynamic ball-carrier who should instantly become the focus of the Raiders offense, taking pressure off Geno Smith as he settles in.

MAXX CROSBY

DEFENSIVE END

© Getty Images

It was a down year for Crosby, who registered his lowest sack total (7.5) since 2020, but a big reason for that was a nagging ankle injury that he picked up in Week 2 and which finally ended his season after 12 games. However, he is a dependable player and expected to be back to full strength for 2025.

GENO SMITH

QUARTERBACK

© Getty Images

Some people thought Smith's 2022 season in Seattle was a one-off, but he backed it up with two more excellent campaigns and comes to the Raiders with high hopes. Smith needs to cut down a little on his interceptions (15 last year) but his accuracy and poise should revive a moribund offense.

2024

HIGHLIGHT OF THE SEASON

In the final quarter of the final game of a dismal season, the Raiders got something to smile about when Jakobi Meyers caught a 24-yard pass from Aidan O'Connell. The game was still competitive (the Raiders were only trailing by a touchdown), but the true significance of the play was that it put Meyers over the 1,000-yard mark for the first time in his career. For three straight years (with the Patriots and Raiders) he had clocked over 800 but had been unable to take the next step.

With the unimpressive quarterback room on the Raiders in 2024 the odds did not appear to be in his favour, but on a slick play from the Raiders' 42-yard line, O'Connell dropped back and calmly tossed a strike into the middle of the field, connecting with Meyers, who took the ball to the Chargers' 34.

Meyers finished with nine catches for 123 yards and a touchdown, but his landmark day wasn't enough to salvage a win as the Raiders sank to their 13th loss of the campaign.

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LOS ANGELES CHARGERS

The Chargers are back in business, and building for further success

Jim Harbaugh made an immediate impact with the Chargers, leading them out of the wilderness and back into the playoffs in his first season at the helm. A one-and-done playoff appearance was disappointing, but this was a team that finished dead last in the AFC West the previous campaign, with a 5-12 record – you can only realistically change so much in one season.

The backbone of the team was a stingy defense which jumped from 24th in the league in points allowed, to first. That will be a tough act to follow as leading lights Joey Bosa, 'Poona' Ford and Kristian Fulton all departed in free agency.

There was also a marked improvement in the ground game, but Harbaugh would like to see more from his rushing attack in 2025. He has brought in free agent Najee Harris and first-round draft pick Omarion Hampton at running back, as well as more beef for the line in the form of guard Mekhi Becton. It is a clear statement of intent – the Chargers will look to overpower their opponents this year.

Justin Herbert responded to the improved ground attack and defense with an excellent bounce-back campaign in 2024, in which he was not asked to take risks and responded by throwing just three interceptions all year. He needs more targets this season, and the return of Mike Williams (after a disappointing year with the Jets and Steelers) is unlikely to be enough. Second-round draftee Tre Harris will be given every chance to show what he can do and Tyler Conklin, quietly productive over three seasons with the Jets, should slot in well as a safety-valve option.

> "The backbone of the team was a stingy defense which jumped from 24th in the league in points allowed, to first"

ESTABLISHED **1959**

HEAD COACH **JIM HARBAUGH**

STADIUM **SOFI STADIUM**

DIVISION **AFC WEST**

RIVALS **LAS VEGAS RAIDERS**

2024 RECORD **11-6**

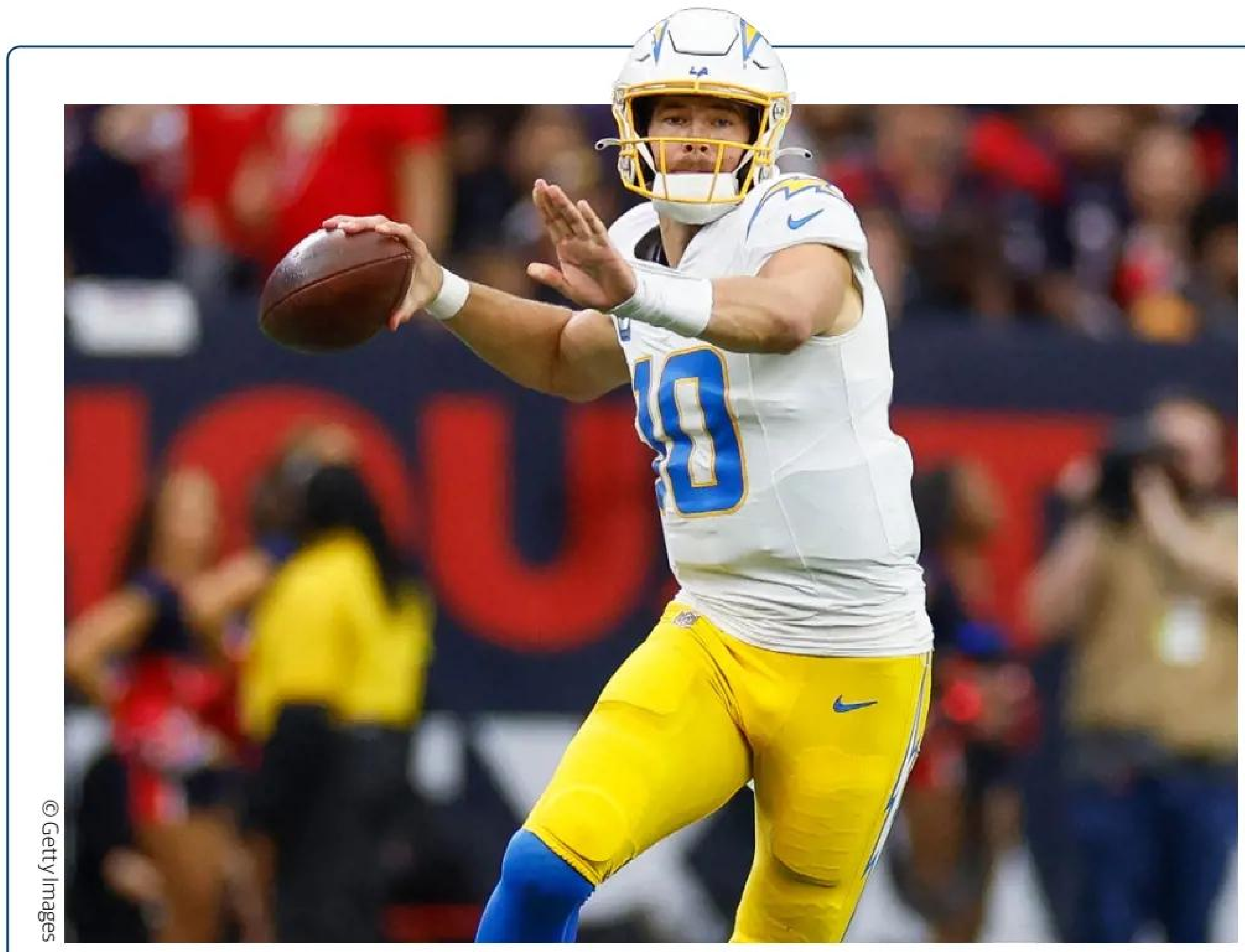
2025 SCHEDULE **0.522**

★★ **HONOURS** ★★

DIVISION
1960, 1961, 1963, 1964, 1965, 1979, 1980, 1981, 1992, 1994, 2004, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009

CONFERENCE
1994

LEAGUE
1963



© Getty Images

STAR PLAYER **JUSTIN HERBERT**

DOB: **10 MARCH 1998** POS: **QUARTERBACK** NO. **10**

★ **Herbert's three interceptions were remarkable (his TD:INT ratio was the eighth best in NFL history), and it wasn't because he wasn't putting the ball in the air – he attempted 504 passes.** His 3,870 yards were nothing special by modern standards, but Harbaugh will gladly take such production and pair it with a brutal ground game as the Chargers establish themselves as a serious rival to the Chiefs.

There was also a feeling that the passing game was really finding its feet as the regular season wound down last year. In three straight wins that clinched a postseason berth, Herbert was majestic, completing 73 per cent of his passes for 911 yards, with seven touchdowns and just one interception. One of his biggest strengths was a great play-action game, which should only improve as the ground game develops.

KEY PERSONNEL

JOE ALT
OFFENSIVE TACKLE

© Getty Images

Alt made the switch from left tackle to right look easy in his rookie season, and together with Rashawn Slater, he gives the Chargers a standout pair of bookends on the line. ESPN gave Alt a win rate of 94.3 per cent when pass-blocking, and he was the consensus top rookie lineman.

RASHAWN SLATER
OFFENSIVE TACKLE

© Getty Images

Slater gave the Chargers superb play while protecting Herbert's blindside in 2024. Perhaps feeling the heat from Alt, Slater turned in his first Pro Bowl campaign, and the two worked well together – Alt claimed that Slater was a constant source of input and support during his rookie season.

DAIYAN HENLEY
LINEBACKER

© Getty Images

Henley was an afterthought under the previous regime – as a rookie he did not start a single game, but in his sophomore campaign he racked up 147 tackles after starting all 17 regular season games. A top run defender, he is also already firmly established as a favourite among Chargers' fans.

LADD MCCONKEY
WIDE RECEIVER

© Getty Images

McConkey enjoyed a brilliant rookie campaign on a unit that badly needed someone to make an impact. His 82 catches for 1,149 yards paced the team in both categories (as well as setting rookie records for the franchise), and only Quentin Johnston caught more than his seven touchdowns.

2024

HIGHLIGHT OF THE SEASON

Justin Herbert's Week 18 game against the Las Vegas Raiders was technically his second best of the year, in terms of passer rating, but by any other measure it was his most impressive. The Chargers had won two games in a row to clinch a postseason berth, so there was nothing on the line as they trotted out for their final game of the regular season – but the Chargers never need added incentive when facing their bitter divisional rivals. With the pressure off, Herbert completed 78 per cent of his passes for 346 yards and two scores as Los Angeles ran out 34-20 winners.

"He's an artist," raved Jim Harbaugh after the game. "It's artistry… that was a perfect game played by the quarterback."

Herbert threw touchdown passes to DJ Chark and Will Dissly, as well as a two-point conversion to McConkey. Outgaining the Raiders by 473 yards to 264 was the perfect way to end the regular season and gives Chargers fans reason for optimism in 2025.

© Getty Images

TOLBERT
1
SAINRISTIL
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WASHINGTON
COWBOYS
© Getty Images

DALLAS COWBOYS

A big-time trade has rekindled hope for America's Team

Five years ago, the Cowboys were boasting about being 'Team 40 Burger', having the ability to drop 40 points on any opponent thanks to a glittering array of offensive talent.

Today the Cowboys are rebuilding, following the firing of head coach Mike McCarthy (some would say this came a year too late) and the fading of the stars who once made them so feared. Ezekiel Elliott returned to the Cowboys last year, but was a shadow of his former self at age 29. The three-strong receiver corps of CeeDee Lamb, Michael Gallup and Amari Cooper has been reduced to Lamb doing the best he can with inconsistent quarterbacking.

The good news there is that quarterback Dak Prescott has alternated good and bad years over the past six seasons, and so he's due a good one in 2025 .

With new coach Brian Schottenheimer, the Cowboys are embarking on a new era, and it looked to be getting off to a slow start. Incoming talent appeared to be thin – the biggest contract handed out in free agency went to punter Bryan Anger – but then came the acquisition by trade of George Pickens, a deep-threat who can take the top off a defense and take pressure off Lamb. Lamb does his best work out of the slot, and Pickens will help clear space for him to operate. It may be too early to start talking about Team 40 Burger again, but the Cowboys would settle for Team 30 Burger for now – they only hit that number three times in 2024.

The upcoming contract extension for Micah Parsons is the big theme on defense. He remains the Cowboys' best defensive player, but second-round draftee Donovan Ezeiruaku should add a little extra juice to the pass-rush.

> "With a new coach leading the way, in Brian Schottenheimer, the Cowboys are embarking on a new era"

ESTABLISHED **1960**

HEAD COACH **BRIAN SCHOTTENHEIMER**

STADIUM **AT&T STADIUM**

DIVISION **NFC EAST**

RIVALS **WASHINGTON COMMANDERS**

2024 RECORD **7-10**

2025 SCHEDULE **0.557**

★★ **HONOURS** ★★

DIVISION

1967, 1968, 1969, 1970, 1971, 1973, 1976, 1977, 1978, 1979, 1981, 1985, 1992, 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 1998, 2007, 2009, 2014, 2016, 2018, 2021, 2023

CONFERENCE

1966, 1967, 1970, 1971, 1975, 1977, 1978, 1992, 1993, 1995

LEAGUE

1971, 1977, 1992, 1993, 1995

© Getty Images

STAR PLAYER **MICAH PARSONS**

DOB: **26 MAY 1999** POS: **DEFENSIVE END** NO. **11**

★ **A dreaded high ankle sprain dogged Parsons this year, and he missed four games.** Even so, he registered 12 sacks and was still one of the most dangerous defensive players in the game. He only had one sack in the four weeks before his injury, so looking more closely at the numbers, when he came back at full strength he ripped off 11 sacks in just nine contests.

Parsons also won points with Cowboys' fans by remaining upbeat during a difficult season: "Why would I be upset?" he commented when the team was 3-7. "I'm playing for America's team, I'm doing what I love to do."

Anybody doubting that he will get a monster extension, perhaps even becoming the highest paid defender in the game, is kidding themselves.

KEY PERSONNEL

CEEDEE LAMB
WIDE RECEIVER

© Getty Images

Lamb has remained consistent even as the talent around him has deteriorated, and he will benefit more than anybody except Dak Prescott from the arrival of George Pickens. He has shown frustration with the team's inability to give him a partner in crime, but that could all be about to change.

COOPER BEEBE
CENTER

© Getty Images

The Cowboys offensive line is fading, with Zack Martin retiring this offseason, but Beebe's rookie season gives hope for the future. He stepped in at center and started all 17 games. He wasn't perfect, but on 692 passing plays, he allowed three sacks and 18 pressures, gaining valuable experience for this coming season.

DAK PRESCOTT
QUARTERBACK

© Getty Images

Prescott will hope to bounce back from the hamstring injury that ended his season early last year. Cooper Rush offered comparable production in relief but is not considered a threat. Prescott will hope history repeats itself – after his last two down years, he returned with a 4,000-yard campaign the following season.

MARIST LIUFAU
LINEBACKER

© Getty Images

Liufau got a chance to step in when DeMarvion Overshown went down to an ACL injury, and he grabbed his chance, flying around and attacking the ball like a player who realised he may not get a better chance again. He ultimately finished the season with 50 tackles after making nine starts.

2024

HIGHLIGHT OF THE SEASON

DeMarvion Overshown missed all of his rookie year after tearing his ACL in the preseason, and his 2024 campaign ended with another ACL tear. The Cowboys are crossing their fingers that he can return in 2025, because in between those two devastating injuries he has established himself as one of their brightest defensive stars.

In the 13 games he played last season, he notched up five sacks, one forced fumble, one fumble recovery and one interception. The latter took place in the Week 13 game against the Giants. Overshown came on a blitz as Drew Lock dropped back to pass. Devin Singletary delivered a hit but then let Overshown go as he went out to catch a screen pass.

Overshown jumped high to bat away Lock's pass, and then gathered in the ball before haring off for a 27-yard touchdown return. The play gave Dallas their first lead of the game and they hung on for the win. The next week, Overshown tore multiple ligaments in his right knee.

© Getty Images

© Getty Images

NEW YORK GIANTS

A long rebuild lies ahead for Big Blue in one of the NFL's toughest divisions.

It's hard to believe that in 2022 the Giants not only finished with a winning record but notched a playoff win to boot. Those halcyon days of Brian Daboll's first season as head coach seem an awfully long time ago now. No team notched fewer than New York's paltry three victories in 2024.

The beginnings of a rebuild are already in place. The Giants have a new QB room following the mid-season release of Daniel Jones, adding a seasoned starter in Russell Wilson, a veteran backup in Jameis Winston and drafting what they hope will be their future franchise QB in Jaxson Dart from Ole Miss. Add that to other notable additions including number three pick Abdul Carter and the exciting young offensive talents of Malik Nabers and Tyrone Tracy Jr and there are some reasons for long-term optimism.

But the Giants find themselves in an unforgiving place – specifically the NFC East. Between the Super Bowl champion Eagles, a resurgent, Jayden Daniels-led Washington, and the always-ambitious Cowboys, it might be the toughest division in football right now. And the rest of New York's schedule doesn't look much better – the Giants have the toughest of any team in 2025.

If it all seems like doom and gloom, then at least Giants fans can keep their expectations in check. After all, this is a team that has only put together two winning seasons in the last 12 years. And after watching star running back Saquon Barkley get traded to their hated rivals the Eagles last year and immediately win a championship, surely things can only get better for the boys in blue.

> "The Giants find themselves in an unforgiving place – specifically the NFC East"

ESTABLISHED **1925**

HEAD COACH **BRIAN DABOLL**

STADIUM **METLIFE STADIUM**

DIVISION **NFC EAST**

RIVALS **WASHINGTON COMMANDERS, PHILADELPHIA EAGLES, DALLAS COWBOYS, NEW YORK JETS**

2024 RECORD **3-14**

2025 SCHEDULE **0.574**

★★ HONOURS ★★

DIVISION

1933, 1934, 1935, 1938, 1939, 1941, 1944, 1946, 1986, 1989, 1990, 1997, 2000, 2005, 2008, 2011

CONFERENCE

1956, 1958, 1959, 1961, 1962, 1963, 1986, 1990, 2000, 2007, 2011

LEAGUE

1927, 1934, 1938, 1956, 1986, 1990, 2007, 2011

© Getty Images

STAR PLAYER **MALIK NABERS**

DOB: **28 JULY 2003** POS: **WIDE RECEIVER** NO. **1**

★ **While most Giants fans would happily trade or release almost every player from the 2024 roster given the chance, a notable exception was star rookie Malik Nabers.** The number six overall pick came with high expectations after a stellar college career with LSU, but exceeded them with a record-breaking first season in the NFL. Despite playing with what could charitably be called 'lesser' QB talent, Nabers amassed a whopping 1,204 yards on 109 receptions – a rookie record for the league – with seven touchdowns to establish himself as not only the Giants' primary offensive weapon, but one of the NFL's most productive receivers. Even with these gaudy numbers, however, Nabers was frustrated for long stretches of the season with the team's overall performance. The Giants would do well to keep their star man happy.

KEY PERSONNEL

DEXTER LAWRENCE

NOSE TACKLE

© Getty Images

Lawrence earned his third Pro Bowl selection in 2024 and it's easy to see why. Since the Giants drafted him in the first round in 2019, no player on the team has more than his 30 total sacks, with last season featuring a career-best total of nine.

ABDUL CARTER

DEFENSIVE END

© Getty Images

The number three overall pick in 2025, Carter was ranked by many as the best talent in the draft. An explosive defender with elite-level talent, he immediately upgrades a defense that already has the makings of a top ten unit in the league. Expect Carter to produce from the get-go.

RUSSELL WILSON

QUARTERBACK

© Getty Images

Wilson was solid in his sole season with the Steelers, proving that he still has some mileage left in what has been a glittering NFL career. He'll likely be the Giants' starter going into 2025, though don't be surprised if Jaxson Dart has usurped him by the end of the season.

BRIAN DABOLL

HEAD COACH

© Getty Images

Daboll was the NFL's Coach of the Year in 2022, but two seasons of regression have him in the hot seat. While the team's management recognises this is a rebuilding project, it's not yet clear whether Daboll will be the coach to see that project through.

2024

HIGHLIGHT OF THE SEASON

It's difficult to imagine now, but things looked like they were turning around for the Giants in Week 5 as the much-fancied Seahawks welcomed them to Lumen Field. Expectations were low with Malik Nabers and Tyrone Tracy Jr ruled out with injury, but despite those absences the G-Men fought back from an initial deficit with some stellar defensive play to hold a narrow lead in the final minutes of the fourth quarter. As Seattle lined up what would have been a game-tying field goal, the Giants' special teams pulled off a blitz, with Isaiah Simmons vaulting the A-Gap to pull off a dramatic block that was then returned for a score. Quarterback Daniel Jones's final stat line here was an impressive 257 passing yards (plus another 38 on the ground) with two TDs and no turnovers, but this was something of a last hurrah for him with New York. This would be Jones's final win as a Giant before the team benched and eventually released him just over a month later.

© Getty Images

PHILADELPHIA EAGLES

Their roster has been raided, but the Eagles still have hopes of a repeat

Following their collapse at the end of the 2023 season, the Eagles were under the microscope as 2024 got underway. They failed to impress, limping to a 2-2 record, but then something extraordinary happened… they ripped off ten straight wins and blew into the postseason as the best team in pro football, even though their early wobble had condemned them to a Wild Card berth.

Once in the playoffs, they just got better and better, beating the Packers and Rams before demolishing the Commanders in the NFC Championship game and then dominating the Chiefs in the Super Bowl.

There is no doubt about the key ingredient in the Eagles' success. Quarterback Jalen Hurts was efficient and careful with the ball, while the defense allowed the fewest yards of any team during the regular season – but it was Saquon Barkley who was running the show. His $37.75 million free-agent contract looks like the bargain of the century as he rushed for 2,005 yards and caught passes for 278 more – no wonder he was named Offensive Player of the Year.

Attention now shifts to staying at the top of the NFL tree, and that will not be easy, as the rest of the NFL has pillaged the roster with a vengeance. Guard Mekhi Becton has jumped ship after relaunching his career last season, but it is defense where the biggest changes are happening. Gone are Milton Williams and Josh Sweat, in are draftees Jihaad Campbell, Andrew Mukuba and Ty Robinson. The Eagles will also be praying that Bryce Huff gives them more in his second season with the team. Achieving just 13 total tackles and 2.5 sacks was a poor return on the $51.1 million contract that the Eagles gave him last offseason.

> "Barkley's $37.75 million free-agent contract looks like the bargain of the century as he rushed for 2,005 yards"

ESTABLISHED **1933**

HEAD COACH **NICK SIRIANNI**

STADIUM **LINCOLN FINANCIAL FIELD**

DIVISION **NFC EAST**

RIVALS **NEW YORK GIANTS**

2024 RECORD **14-3**

2025 SCHEDULE **0.561**

★★ **HONOURS** ★★

DIVISION
1947, 1948, 1949, 1980, 1988, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2006, 2010, 2013, 2017, 2019, 2022, 2024

CONFERENCE
1960, 1980, 2004, 2017, 2022, 2024

LEAGUE
1948, 1949, 1960, 2017, 2024

© Getty Images

STAR PLAYER **SAQUON BARKLEY**

DOB: **9 FEBRUARY 1997** POS: **RUNNING BACK** NO. **26**

★ **Barkley has proven time and time again that he can bounce back from disappointing seasons.** After the Giants thought he was a spent force, the Eagles swooped to add him to their offense and he delivered a season for the ages. Barkley put to bed doubts about his durability by carrying a back-breaking 345 times (his previous high had been 295) and he averaged an incredible 125.3 yards over his 16 starts.

It is unlikely the Eagles would put so much on his plate again in 2025, and they would love free-agent pickup AJ Dillon to chip in with his customary 600-700 yards. There is also the complication of a new offensive coordinator, as Kevin Patullo steps in for the departed Kellen Moore, but Barkley remains the Eagles' main man.

KEY PERSONNEL

JALEN HURTS
QUARTERBACK

© Getty Images

With Barkley carrying the offensive load, Hurts did not have to be the star of the show, but he contributed exactly what was needed – solid, safe quarterbacking with the additional bonus of a great rushing threat of his own (630 yards and an incredible 14 touchdowns).

JALEN CARTER
DEFENSIVE TACKLE

© Getty Images

Carter hit the rookie wall in his first season, but had no problems in 2024, playing in 16 games and averaging over 50 snaps per outing. He was also a massively destructive force on the interior of the Eagles line, and helped to blow up the Chiefs' offensive line in the Super Bowl.

ZACK BAUN
LINEBACKER

© Getty Images

There are some people who think Baun is the Eagles' best defensive player. He flies all over the field, and although the speed at which he plays sometimes leads to him missing a tackle, he still racked up an impressive 151 combined stops last season, and he is simply brilliant in coverage.

JIHAAD CAMPBELL
LINEBACKER

© Getty Images

Campbell was selected partly because of the season-ending injury suffered by Nakobe Dean in the playoffs. Dean had enjoyed a great comeback season, with 128 combined tackles, but now Campbell will get his chance to showcase his huge physical ability, especially as a pass-rusher.

2024

HIGHLIGHT OF THE SEASON

The Eagles won the Super Bowl, but that is covered elsewhere in this magazine, so we'll look at another of their season highlights here. Two weeks before the biggest game of the year, they faced off against a dangerous and surprising Washington Commanders team in the NFC Championship Game, and some expected rookie quarterback Jayden Daniels to give them all they could handle.

Daniels had enjoyed a superb rookie campaign, and had led the Commanders to two playoff victories, against the Buccaneers and the Lions. He performed solidly against the Eagles, passing for 255 yards and a touchdown, but Washington was completely blown out of the game.

In one of the most dominating performances of the year, Philadelphia piled on 55 points, and the Commanders were unable to keep up. After hanging tough for three quarters, they wilted under the constant battering from Philadelphia's offense. The Eagles' last three possessions went for 51, 30 and 80 yards, and all ended in rushing touchdowns (including a one-yard 'Brotherly Shove' score from Jalen Hurts). The Eagles had established themselves as the bullies of the NFL, and they weren't done yet.

© Getty Images

© Getty Images

WASHINGTON COMMANDERS

The window has opened for the Commanders – and they are going for it

A great quarterback on his rookie contract is a difficult thing to find – Washington have found one, and that gives them a window to go all-in on winning a championship. In a few seasons (all being well) Daniels will be given a huge contract that will limit the team's ability to bring in other talent, but for now that is not a concern, and the Commanders have been busy improving the team around their brilliant new signal-caller.

Daniels showed poise as well as immense talent in his first season, and the wins came in bunches. Four-, three- and five-game winning streaks took them into the playoffs, and the fairy tale only ended when they fell under the wheels of the Eagles juggernaut as it thundered towards a championship title.

Major new pieces have been brought in. Deebo Samuel will complement Terry McLaurin in the receivers room, while Laremy Tunsil should improve Daniels' blindside protection – over six years in Houston he graded out as the second-best pass-protector in the game, according to *Pro Football Weekly*. Top draft pick Josh Conerly Jr will likely start his NFL career at guard, marking another upgrade.

A weak rush defense was the team's Achilles heel last year. They would have hoped for a return to health and form from Jonathan Allen, but he ultimately left in free agency, and linebacker Bobby Wagner is another year older. There are also no notable names coming in to boost the unit – Javon Kinlaw has been given a three-year, $45 million deal, but he was inconsistent defensive tackle for the Jets last year. The Commanders will hope that better coaching allows him to tap into his undoubtedly huge potential.

> "The Commanders have been busy improving the team around their brilliant new signal-caller"

ESTABLISHED **1932**

HEAD COACH **DAN QUINN**

STADIUM **NORTHWEST STADIUM**

DIVISION **NFC EAST**

RIVALS **DALLAS COWBOYS**

2024 RECORD **12-5**

2025 SCHEDULE **0.550**

★★ **HONOURS** ★★

DIVISION
1936, 1937, 1940, 1942, 1943, 1945, 1972, 1983, 1984, 1987, 1991, 1999, 2012, 2015, 2020

CONFERENCE
1972, 1982, 1983, 1987, 1991

LEAGUE
1937, 1942, 1982, 1987, 1991

© Getty Images

STAR PLAYER **JAYDEN DANIELS**

DOB: **18 DECEMBER 2000** POS: **QUARTERBACK** NO. **05**

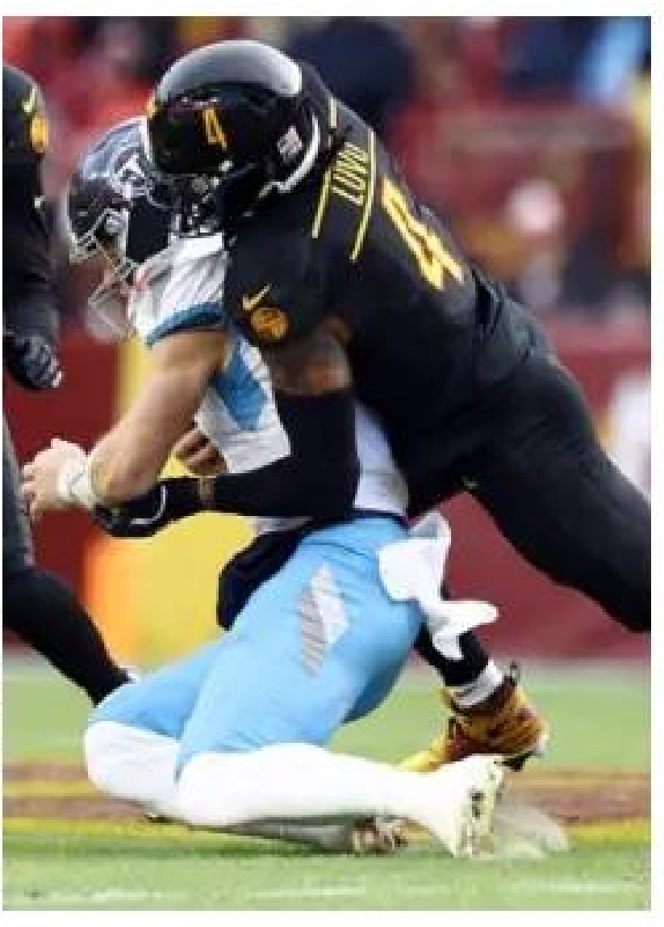
Daniels was everything the Commanders hoped for when they drafted him second overall in the 2024 draft, and barring injury they seem to be set at the position for the next decade at least. He showed great temperament, remaining calm under pressure, and his athleticism was even better than anticipated – he was expected to be a threat running the ball, but nobody expected him to lead the team in rushing (he amassed 891 yards and scored six rushing touchdowns).

Right out of the gate he looked like a special talent. In his first four games he completed 70.8, 79.3, 91.3 and 86.76 per cent of his throws, which is insane for a rookie. He then played extremely well in three playoff games, making you wonder if anything would rattle him.

KEY PERSONNEL

FRANKIE LUVU

LINEBACKER


© Getty Images

Luvu has blossomed in his last three seasons and was once more a bundle of energy in his first campaign with the Commanders. Career-highs in sacks (eight), defended passes (seven) and QB hits (14) showed that he is still developing, and still improving, as a player.

BOBBY WAGNER

LINEBACKER

© Getty Images

Washington wanted a little veteran savvy at the heart of their defense, but Wagner offered more than that. At the age of 34, he played in all 17 games and made 132 combined tackles. The Commanders will be hoping he can keep producing for one or two more seasons yet.

DEEBO SAMUEL

WIDE RECEIVER

© Getty Images

Samuel has been a bit of an enigma, but he brings a dual-threat to the Commanders offense that Daniels will appreciate. Unmotivated with the 49ers the last couple of years, he could be a major asset if he rediscovers the fire that drove him to 1,770 combined yards in 2021.

TYLER BIADASZ

CENTER

© Getty Images

Washington's offensive line was an issue last season, which is why so many resources have been sunk into rebuilding it, but Biadasz was not one of the problems. After joining from the Cowboys he allowed just one sack all season – and taking such a talent away from a rival is always sweet.

2024

HIGHLIGHT OF THE SEASON

When a rookie quarterback starts from day one, everyone is watching to see when he will crumble under the pressure. Facing a strong Bengals team on Monday Night Football in Week 3 looked like a potential cracking point for Daniels, but instead of wilting under the pressure, he flourished.

His stat-line was remarkable – 21 completions from 23 attempts, for 254 yards and two scores – but he was not merely padding his numbers with easy completions, and one of the best throws of his season came under intense pressure.

Leading by five points late in the final quarter, he faced a third-and-seven from the Bengals' 27-yard line, knowing that a field goal would leave the door open for the Bengals to tie the game. A heavy blitz meant Daniels had to deliver his pass with a defensive back in his face, and he was buried a split second after releasing the ball… which landed perfectly in the arms of Terry McLaurin in the end zone for the game-sealing touchdown.

"This is the coming-out party for Jayden Daniels," said ESPN announcer Joe Buck, and he wasn't wrong.

© Getty Images

© Getty Images

CHICAGO BEARS

Major changes in Chicago could produce fast results if Caleb Williams is for real

Everything seemed to be going well in Caleb Williams' rookie season. The Bears jumped out to a 4-2 record behind some strong performances (Williams threw for nine touchdowns in those first six games), but then the offense stalled and the team managed just one more win all season, costing Matt Eberflus his job.

In steps Ben Johnson, the former offensive coordinator of the Lions, and things are about to be shaken up. Williams showed enough in his first season to convince a new coaching staff to build the team around him, and the building has been going on apace.

First of all, the interior of the line protecting Williams has been completely revamped. Joe Thuney and Jonah Jackson, were brought in via trades, with center Drew Dalman coming in free agency. That marks a dramatic upgrade in talent and means that only the starting tackles, Braxton Jones and Darnell Wright, will hold onto their places. How serious were the Bears about improving the line? They added depth at tackle in the form of second-round draft pick Ozzy Trapilo. The draft also brought new targets for Williams, in tight end Colston Loveland, and receiver Luther Burden III.

The defense has not been ignored. Although most of the new toys have been for Johnson, new defensive coordinator Dennis Allen has some new bodies on the line (Dayo Odeyingbo and Grady Jarrett both got big money in free agency) and with the attention they will draw, the linebacker duo of Tremaine Edmunds and TJ Edwards should once more be among the best in the game.

The Bears could do with a dominant pass-rusher emerging. They had many players with multiple sacks, but Montez Sweat led the team with just 5.5.

> "Williams showed enough in his first season to convince a new coaching staff to build the team around him"

ESTABLISHED **1920**

HEAD COACH **BEN JOHNSON**

STADIUM **SOLDIER FIELD**

DIVISION **NFC NORTH**

RIVALS **GREEN BAY**

2024 RECORD **5-12**

2025 SCHEDULE **0.571**

★★ **HONOURS** ★★

DIVISION

1933, 1934, 1937, 1940, 1941, 1942, 1943, 1946, 1984, 1985, 1986, 1987, 1988, 1990, 2001, 2005, 2006, 2010, 2018

CONFERENCE

1956, 1963, 1985, 2006

LEAGUE

1921, 1932, 1933, 1940, 1941, 1943, 1946, 1963, 1985

© Getty Images

STAR PLAYER **CALEB WILLIAMS**

DOB: **18 NOVEMBER 2001** POS: **QUARTERBACK** NO. **10**

★ **Williams showed flashes in his rookie year, and many of his flaws were common for young signal-callers – trying to extend a play for too long rather than throwing the ball away, trying to play 'hero ball', taking too many sacks.** A lot of that can be cured by experience and good coaching, but he had to deal with three offensive coordinators in his first season.

The first year of the Ben Johnson era should be viewed as a reset for Williams. He needs to calm down, start building the fundamentals and (hopefully) start to benefit from a better offensive line and better scheme. He has great receivers and now a potentially great tight end to work with, and if the Bears are going to be a threat anytime soon, he needs to make use of them.

KEY PERSONNEL

D'ANDRE SWIFT
RUNNING BACK

© Getty Images

Caleb Williams is not the only player who could benefit from an improved offensive line. Swift was a good soldier in his first season with the Bears, but his 3.8-yards-per-carry average was a career low. Expect him to average as much as a yard better this year with the new beef in front of him.

ROME ODUNZE
WIDE RECEIVER

© Getty Images

Odunze is singled out here for his impressive rookie season and great potential, but he is just part of a three-headed receiving corps that should be as good as any out there. Along with DJ Moore and draftee Luther Burden III, Caleb Williams has plenty of targets to work with.

COLSTON LOVELAND
TIGHT END

© Getty Images

Many analysts thought Loveland was the best tight end in the draft, especially as a pass-catcher. He may not be the blocker that Tyler Warren is (Warren was the first tight end off the board), but Loveland has great moves, runs excellent routes and is a strong catcher.

TJ EDWARDS
LINEBACKER

© Getty Images

Edwards has been one of the best free-agent acquisitions in Bears history. In his two seasons since leaving the Eagles, he has notched up 284 tackles and 6.5 sacks. His main competition may be from fellow 'backer Tremaine Edmunds, who also came to the Bears in that superb 2023 free-agent haul.

2024

HIGHLIGHT OF THE SEASON

On Thanksgiving Day, Caleb Williams served notice that he has the toughness to play in the league, an essential quality for a team like the Bears, where workhorses are valued over thoroughbreds. Trailing 16-0 to the Lions at the start of the second half, there was every reason for the team to just retreat into its shell, but instead they continued to show heart and fight, and none more so than Williams.

He took his first sack of the game on the fourth play of the second half (it was his 45th sack of the season, the most in the league at that point). On a third-and-15 he then bought time and threaded a pass to Keenan Allen to convert.

Two plays later he scrambled for a first down but took a hard hit on the sideline, which bent him in half and brought gasps of dismay from the commentary team of Jim Nantz and Tony Romo. Shrugging it off, Williams threw a 31-yard touchdown to Allen on the very next play, went to the blue tent for evaluation, and returned to throw two more touchdowns.

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SKIPPER
70
LaPORTA
87
ZYLSTR
84
CHOOSE LOVE
99

© Getty Images

DETROIT LIONS

The Lions will be banging on the door to the Super Bowl again this season

The Lions were an offensive juggernaut during the regular season, rolling to a 15-2 record and looking unstoppable. If they had a weakness, it was their 30th-ranked passing defense – and that cost them in the playoffs.

After taking a well-earned bye week, they were ambushed by the Washington Commanders and their precocious rookie quarterback, Jayden Daniels. The Lions offense was firing, but they just could not stop Daniels and went down to a dispiriting 45-31 defeat.

This year, much has changed. There are two new coordinators on the team after Ben Johnson and Aaron Glenn moved on to head coaching jobs. John Morton and Kelvin Sheppard take over as offensive and defensive coordinators, respectively, and it's clear that Morton has the more enticing spot.

The Lions offense should be lethal again this year. They have the best one-two punch in the backfield pairing of Jahmyr Gibbs and David Montgomery, they have a quarterback (Jared Goff) at his peak and they have a receiving corps featuring two thousand-yard receivers (Amon-Ra St Brown and Jameson Williams) as well as one of the best young tight ends in the game (Sam LaPorta).

On defense, the combination of a better pass-rush and improved coverage should see the Lions make a jump, but much will depend on how well Aidan Hutchinson recovers from his broken leg, which he suffered in Week 6 last year. There were hints that he might have returned had the Lions made the Super Bowl, but the extra rehab time will have helped.

Former Jet DJ Reed has been brought in to help the pass defense on the other end, and last year's rookie corner, Terrion Arnold, got some valuable experience in his 15 starts. He should be improved this year.

> "The Lions have the best one-two punch in the backfield pairing of Jahmyr Gibbs and David Montgomery"

ESTABLISHED **1930**

HEAD COACH **DAN CAMPBELL**

STADIUM **FORD FIELD**

DIVISION **NFC NORTH**

RIVALS **CHICAGO BEARS**

2024 RECORD **15-2**

2025 SCHEDULE **0.571**

★★ **HONOURS** ★★

DIVISION
1935, 1983, 1991, 1993, 2023, 2024

CONFERENCE
1952, 1953, 1954, 1957

LEAGUE
1935, 1952, 1953, 1957

© Getty Images

STAR PLAYER **JARED GOFF**

DOB: **14 OCTOBER 1994** POS: **QUARTERBACK** NO. **16**

★ **Goff enjoyed his best season since joining the Lions, seeing improvements in every major category – completion rate (72.4 per cent), yardage (4,629) and touchdowns (37).** He isn't quite in the very top bracket of quarterbacks who can take over a game, but as part of a functioning system it is hard to find anyone who does it better.

Detroit is therefore the perfect situation for him, as the powerful ground attack, strong offensive line and stable of receiving targets mean he does not have to play hero ball.

A lot will depend on how new offensive coordinator Jon Morton handles things, but he is on record as saying he will not change much, and why would he? Keeping things as familiar as possible will suit Goff down to the ground.

KEY PERSONNEL

JAHMYR GIBBS

RUNNING BACK

© Getty Images

After a great debut year splitting carries with David Montgomery, Gibbs took over as the primary ball-carrier last year and ripped off 1,412 rushing yards, adding another 517 through the air and scoring 20 total touchdowns. He could already be the best back in the game, and the presence of Montgomery guards against overworking.

AIDAN HUTCHINSON

DEFENSIVE END

© Getty Images

Hutchinson's injury in Week 6 of last year was a devastating blow to the Lions' defense. Even though he played just four and a half games, he finished the season as the team's leading pass rusher with 7.5 sacks. He aims to keep his weight down in the low 260s this year to limit the stress on his leg.

JACK CAMPBELL

LINEBACKER

© Getty Images

Campbell has become exactly what the Lions hoped for when they selected him in the first round of the 2023 draft. A violent player, who operates at 100 miles per hour, he led the Lions with 131 tackles in his second year, having appeared in every game last season.

AMON-RA ST BROWN

WIDE RECEIVER

© Getty Images

The emergence of Jameson Williams took a little heat off St Brown last year, and John Morton has talked about Williams 'breaking out' this year. If he does, that will give the Lions perhaps the best receiving duo, as well as the best pair of running backs, in the game.

2024

HIGHLIGHT OF THE SEASON

The Lions offense was lethal last season, able to strike from anywhere on the field. They could beat you straight up, but when they threw in a little trickery things became even harder for defenses to handle.

In Week 6, facing a tough Dallas team, the Lions were leading 10-3 when they went for the jugular. On a 1st and 10 play from just inside their own half, Ben Johnson called for some razzle dazzle.

Jared Goff took the snap from under center and handed off to David Montgomery, who instantly flipped the ball to Amon-Ra St Brown, who had doubled back into the backfield.

With the defense thinking reverse, St Brown then tossed the ball back to Goff, who calmly tossed it to a wide-open Sam LaPorta at the Dallas 32. The speedy tight end then galloped down the sideline and leapt into the end zone for a stunning 52-yard score.

Four of Detroit's skill-position players had touched the ball on the play, but also critical was the time given by the offensive line, which stood the Dallas defense up and allowed the play to unfold.

© Getty Images

© Getty Images

GREEN BAY PACKERS

Green Bay are reloading for another tilt at the NFC North

The Packers did things the hard way last year – no team has ever made the postseason after playing five opponents who finished with at least 13 wins (they lost four of those encounters). They finished with both the fifth-ranked offense and defense, in terms of yards allowed, and that would usually lead to a better record than 11-6, but the strength of opposition meant the Packers had to be satisfied with a third-place divisional finish and a Wild Card berth.

The running game was the strength of the offense, and none of the young receivers expected to break out in 2024 managed more than 55 passes. Identifying this as a weakness, the front office dipped into the college ranks twice, nabbing Matthew Golden and Savion Williams in the first and third rounds of the draft. The extra firepower could help Jordan Love build on an efficient but slightly underwhelming season. His passer rating was actually higher than in 2023, but his yardage and touchdowns were both significantly down. Guard Aaron Banks joins via free agency to boost the offensive line, but the defensive line is a potential problem area and little has been done to help there. Rushing the passer was a weak spot (Rashan Gary led the team with just 7.5 sacks) and although departed defensive tackle Tedarrell Slaton was primarily a run-stopper, his experience will be missed in the trenches.

Still, there is youth everywhere on defense, especially at linebacker, where Quay Walker, Edgerrin Cooper, Lukas Van Ness and Isaiah McDuffie are all brimming with potential. Along with safeties Javon Bullard and Evan Williams, and defensive lineman Kingsley Enagbare this could be one of the best and youngest units in the game.

> “The Packers finished with both the fifth-ranked offense and defense in 2024, in terms of yards allowed”

ESTABLISHED **1919**

HEAD COACH **MATT LAFLEUR**

STADIUM **LAMBEAU FIELD**

DIVISION **NFC NORTH**

RIVALS **CHICAGO BEARS**

2024 RECORD **11-6**

2025 SCHEDULE **0.557**

★★ HONOURS ★★

DIVISION

1936, 1938, 1939, 1944, 1967, 1972, 1995, 1996, 1997, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2007, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2016, 2019, 2020, 2021

CONFERENCE

1960, 1961, 1962, 1965, 1966, 1967, 1996, 1997, 2010

LEAGUE

1929, 1930, 1931, 1936, 1939, 1944, 1961, 1962, 1965, 1966, 1967, 1996, 2010

© Getty Images

STAR PLAYER **XAVIER MCKINNEY**

DOB: **8 AUGUST 1998** POS: **SAFETY** NO. **29**

McKinney was a smash hit in his first season with the Packers. He picked off a career-high eight passes, as well as breaking up 11 more and adding 88 tackles. His efforts won him his first Pro Bowl berth and he was named to the All-Pro squad.

With his previous team, McKinney had been moved around the defense, playing in the box on more than a third of his plays and also seeing significant action in the slot. In Jeff Hafley's defense he is more often than not a pure free safety, roaming centerfield and striking when he sees the chance.

His four-year, $67 million contract is already looking like a bargain. (On a side note: the Giants letting McKinney *and* Saquon Barkley go in the same offseason has to set some sort of record for ineptness.)

KEY PERSONNEL

JOSH JACOBS
RUNNING BACK

© Getty Images

Did any team bring in two more impactful free agents than the Packers? As well as McKinney, Jacobs was another resounding success. He is a dual threat, as his 1,329 yards on the ground and 342 through the air attest. He will remain the focus of the Packers' rushing attack in 2025.

KINGSLEY ENAGBARE
DEFENSIVE END

© Getty Images

In Jeff Hafley's 4-3 defense, Enagbare was asked to play as a defensive end rather than as an outside linebacker, and he adjusted smoothly, giving the Packers some much-needed pass-rush juice. As no new faces have been brought in on the line, he will be counted on to step up this coming season.

EDGERRIN COOPER
LINEBACKER

© Getty Images

It took a little while for the Packers to start trusting their second-round draft pick, but his snap counts steadily climbed and he started three of the team's last four regular season games. He outplayed top pick Lukas Van Ness and is being counted on as key component of the Packers defense this year.

JORDAN LOVE
QUARTERBACK

© Getty Images

Love was steady in his second season as the full-time starter, guiding his team to nine wins while facing a tough schedule. There is good reason to hope he will return to his more prolific form from 2023 – following the draft, he has arguably the deepest receiving corps in the game at his disposal.

2024

HIGHLIGHT OF THE SEASON

On a Thursday night game in Week 13, the Packers showed exactly how tough they were to beat in 2024. Playing the Dolphins, they had built up a 27-11 lead in the fourth quarter, but Tua Tagovailoa had driven down to their one-yard line and the Dolphins had elected to go for it on fourth-and-one. A touchdown could bring the Dolphins right back into the game... but instead the Packers defensive backs smothered Miami's receivers and the pass-rush swarmed over Tagovailoa, sacking him back at the seven to turn the ball over on downs. Quay Walker was credited with the sack, but it was a matter of the Miami offensive line being completely dismantled.

Jordan Love then took the ball and calmly guided his team out of trouble, completing four passes while Josh Jacobs added effective runs as the Packers drove to the Miami 15. After bleeding more than four minutes off the clock, a 33-yard field goal from Brandon McManus sealed the win. It was as effective a demonstration of how to close out a win as you could wish to see.

© Getty Images

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MINNESOTA VIKINGS

An uncertain future awaits in Minneapolis as the JJ McCarthy era begins

The Vikings had a huge decision to make this offseason – should they trust that Sam Darnold had really turned a corner, or should they stick with their original plan and let JJ McCarthy have his turn at running the offense? The Vikings ultimately decided to let Darnold go, and whether or not that was the right decision will dictate how this season goes.

Minnesota was a big surprise last year, carving out a 14-3 record that would usually have been good enough to win the NFC North. Darnold's numbers (4,319 yards and 35 touchdowns) were great, but there was a sense that he was simply performing efficiently in a solid system. The team was tested again when Aaron Rodgers briefly entered the picture as a potential short-term option, but again the Vikings held true to their plan. McCarthy is the man this year.

After losing all of his first season to a knee injury, McCarthy will effectively be a rookie, so other parts of the team will need to step up to compensate for the expected growing pains. He is likely to struggle early as he gets up to speed with the pro game, but a strong offensive line should help with that. The Vikings have also brought in free agents Will Fries and Ryan Kelly, and drafted Donovan Jackson, so the interior line might be totally revamped – it may just take a while to come together.

It's the same story on the defensive line, where two big bodies have been brought in for the interior – Jonathan Allen and Javon Hargrave should significantly upgrade the team's defensive tackle production. Yet more money (a three-year, $54 million deal) was splashed to keep cornerback Byron Murphy on the team.

> "After losing all of his first season to a knee injury, McCarthy will effectively be a rookie"

ESTABLISHED **1960**

HEAD COACH **KEVIN O'CONNELL**

STADIUM **US BANK STADIUM**

DIVISION **NFC NORTH**

RIVALS **GREEN BAY PACKERS**

2024 RECORD **14-3**

2025 SCHEDULE **0.557**

★★ **HONOURS** ★★

DIVISION
1968, 1969, 1970, 1971, 1973, 1974, 1975, 1976, 1977, 1978, 1980, 1989, 1992, 1994, 1998, 2000, 2008, 2009, 2015, 2017, 2022

CONFERENCE
1969, 1973, 1974, 1976

LEAGUE
1969

© Getty Images

STAR PLAYER **JUSTIN JEFFERSON**

DOB: **16 JUNE 1999** POS: **WIDE RECEIVER** NO. **18**

★ **Jefferson struck up a deadly partnership with Sam Darnold last year, and he will be vital to the development of JJ McCarthy this season.** Jefferson will need to guard against the frustration that will be natural playing with a quarterback who is, to all intents and purposes, a rookie.

Jefferson may be the best receiver in the game, although this is an era with several outstanding candidates for that title. He bounced back from a relatively quiet 2023 to dominate last year, catching 103 passes for 1,533 yards and ten touchdowns. He plays bigger than his size, is remarkably smooth in his cuts and never puts his hands up to catch the ball until the last moment, all of which combines to make him a nightmare to defend.

KEY PERSONNEL

BYRON MURPHY

CORNERBACK

© Getty Images

Murphy is a solid cornerback, capable of making splashy plays at critical moments (he picked off six passes last year). He is not a lockdown corner, but that means quarterbacks will test him, and that gives him the opportunities to make big plays. He is also a sure tackler, making 81 stops last year.

JONATHAN GREENARD

LINEBACKER

© Getty Images

Greenard is mostly unknown outside of Minnesota, but that will eventually change if he continues to rack up double-digit sacks. Last year, Titans head coach Brian Callahan called him "the most underrated edge player in football right now". He made his first Pro Bowl last season.

ANDREW VAN GINKEL

LINEBACKER

© Getty Images

In combination with Greenard, Van Ginkel gives the Vikings a great pass-rush pairing. In a breakout season, he started all 17 games for the first time and made 11.5 sacks. He also returned both of his interceptions for touchdowns. Like Greenard, he made his first trip to the Pro Bowl.

AARON JONES

RUNNING BACK

© Getty Images

Can the Vikings get another productive season out of Jones? He tends to alternate up and down years, and he's due for a down campaign, but an effective ground game is essential if JJ McCarthy is to be given as easy a ride as possible.

2024

HIGHLIGHT OF THE SEASON

Early in the season, the New York Jets were making some noise and they travelled to London to take on the Vikings in what looked like a close match-up. The Vikings defense had other ideas, as they smothered the Jets, neutralising the Aaron Rodgers-led offense for most of the game.

Symptomatic of this was a superbly athletic play by Andrew Van Ginkel. With the Jets looking for their initial first down of the game, with 2:30 to play in the first quarter, Rodgers took a shotgun snap on 3rd and 6 at the Vikings' 38-yard line.

Van Ginkel threatened a blitz, then dropped back right into the intended passing lane. Rodgers did not see him and threw straight to the Vikings defender, who first tipped it and then caught it. Then, looking every bit the marauding Viking warrior, with his golden hair streaming behind him, he returned the ball 63 yards for a touchdown, his second of the season after also scoring against the New York Giants in Week 1.

The first touchdown of the game, it was the highlight play from a defense that ultimately intercepted three passes and sacked Rodgers three times.

© Getty Images

© Getty Images

ATLANTA FALCONS

A huge question at the quarterback position looms over the Falcons this year

The Falcons have painted themselves into a corner and they have nobody to blame but themselves. They have a capable (and very expensive) quarterback under contract, but they also have a first-round draft pick coming into his second season, and they understandably want to see what he can do as well. Kirk Cousins will cost $40 million against the cap this year whether he plays a single down for the Falcons or not. The smart take is that the team will trade him for as much as they can get in preseason or early season, to recoup at least something from their monumental blunder.

Cousins, a highly competent quarterback and a great teammate, does not deserve to be the centre of this kind of circus. It is a fact, though, that his contract stymied the Falcons in free agency. Aside from keeping cornerback Mike Hughes, they only brought in a couple of linebackers, most notably Leonard Floyd. Floyd is on his fourth team in the last four seasons, but he should add something to a pass-rush that badly needs it.

New defensive coordinator Jeff Ulbrich will also have a pair of first-round draft picks to work with, in Jalon Walker and James Pearce Jr. Needing help immediately, the team gave up next year's first-round pick to get Pearce – another ramification of being cash-strapped due to Cousins' contract.

Until the quarterback situation is settled (and who knows how good Michael Penix will be after looking shaky in three starts?), the team will lean heavily on the ground game, and the pairing of Bijan Robinson and Tyler Allgeier. The duo combined for 2,100 rushing yards and 17 rushing touchdowns last year.

> "Until the quarterback situation is settled, the team will lean heavily on the ground game"

ESTABLISHED	**1965**
HEAD COACH	**RAHEEM MORRIS**
STADIUM	**MERCEDES-BENZ STADIUM**
DIVISION	**NFC SOUTH**
RIVALS	**NEW ORLEANS SAINTS**
2024 RECORD	**8-9**
2025 SCHEDULE	**0.478**

★★ **HONOURS** ★★

DIVISION
1980, 1998, 2004, 2010, 2012, 2016

CONFERENCE
1998, 2016

© Getty Images

STAR PLAYER **BIJAN ROBINSON**

DOB: **30 JANUARY 2002** POS: **RUNNING BACK** NO. **7**

★ **It's fair to say that Robinson broke out in his second season.** He finished third in the league in rushing yardage (1,456 yards) and fifth in rushing touchdowns (14). On 365 touches (304 carries and 61 receptions) he fumbled just once, and that was a high direct snap that wasn't his fault.

Robinson blocks well, cuts well and makes yards after contact – he is a complete back and the sort of player a team can build an offense around. The Falcons have understandably been wary of giving him too much of a workload, but as last year went on and his quality became evident, they could not resist. He had 20 carries just twice in the first 11 games, and five times in the last six. Hopefully he will put in an excellent performance once again in 2025.

KEY PERSONNEL

MIKE HUGHES

CORNERBACK

© Getty Images

The Falcons actually got a great deal when keeping Hughes, who just played the best season of his career. He can be up-and-down, but his $6 million per year salary is a bargain for a starting-calibre corner. If he could add the occasional interception to his repertoire the Falcons would be delighted.

RYAN NEUZIL

CENTER

© Getty Images

Last year's starter Drew Dalman got a big-money deal to join the Bears, and the Falcons are counting on Neuzil being ready to step in. He has 12 starts in his three NFL seasons and will need to fill in well if the Falcons' ground game is to continue to be a force.

KADEN ELLISS

LINEBACKER

© Getty Images

Elliss is not a flashy player, but he compiled 151 tackles, five sacks and 43 pressures over his 17 starts and was easily the team's most dependable and impactful linebacker. He got better as the year went on as well, leading to hopes he might find another gear this season.

DRAKE LONDON

WIDE RECEIVER

© Getty Images

London continued his steady ascent into the ranks of the NFL's top receivers, improving in all the major categories – catches (100), yards (1,271) and touchdowns (nine). Picking up his fifth-year option this offseason was a no-brainer, and the two parties are working on a long-term extension to keep him in Atlanta for even longer.

2024

HIGHLIGHT OF THE SEASON

The Falcons were competitive for most of the season, only falling out of the playoff picture with two losses to end their campaign, when Kirk Cousins was benched. Early in the year they looked like they would be a team to be reckoned with, as they took on the eventual Super Bowl champions and beat them in a toe-to-toe fight.

The offense functioned smoothly, with Bijan Robinson and Tyler Allgeier working perfectly in tandem (the Eagles' Saquon Barkley got almost exactly the same yardage as Robinson, 95 yards as opposed to 97, but he needed eight more carries to do so).

Cousins was at his efficient best, passing for 241 yards with two touchdowns and no interceptions, and the defense weighed in as well – Jessie Bates was a tackling machine, piling up 12 stops, and he also made the only interception of the day.

The game ended dramatically, with Drake London catching a seven-yard pass from Cousins with less than a minute to play in the final quarter. At 1-1, after beating one of the best teams in the league, everything seemed possible.

© Getty Images

LEGETTE
17
ATL
22

CAROLINA PANTHERS

Improvement at the end of last year is fuelling hope for this one

The first year of the Dave Canales era brought more pain for Panthers fans, but there are hints that things may be about to turn around. The three-game improvement in the win-loss column was modest, and three of the victories came in overtime, so the Panthers were perilously close to replicating their 2-15 record from 2023. But the end of the year did show some signs of progress – after opening the season 1-7, they went 4-5 over the last nine games.

Most encouraging of all was that Bryce Young had a great end to the campaign, registering a passer rating over 100 in each of the last three games. The front office also has no doubt where improvements need to be made, and it has attacked those weaknesses in a whirlwind offseason that might see the team claw its way to respectability this year.

The defense was an unmitigated disaster, ranking dead last in touchdown passes conceded. The unit was at least balanced – it also ranked last in rushing yardage allowed. In an attempt to stop the bleeding, guns-for-hire have been brought in at all three levels. Tre'von Moehrig joins the secondary, Tershawn Wharton and Bobby Brown have been thrown into the interior defensive line and Patrick Jones has been added to the linebacker corps. Wharton in particular is intriguing, having enjoyed something of a breakout season with the Chiefs last year, while Moehrig brings the experience of 64 starts from his four seasons with the Raiders.

Offensively, much hope is being pinned on Young continuing the develop, but first-round draft pick Tetairoa McMillan gives him a new weapon in his receiving corps.

> "The defense was an unmitigated disaster, ranking dead last in touchdown passes conceded"

ESTABLISHED **1993**

HEAD COACH **DAVE CANALES**

STADIUM **BANK OF AMERICA STADIUM**

DIVISION **NFC SOUTH**

RIVALS **ATLANTA FALCONS**

2024 RECORD **5-12**

2025 SCHEDULE **0.457**

★★ HONOURS ★★

DIVISION
1996, 2003, 2008, 2013, 2014, 2015

CONFERENCE
2003, 2015

© Getty Images

STAR PLAYER **BRYCE YOUNG**

DOB: **25 JULY 2001** POS: **QUARTERBACK** NO. **9**

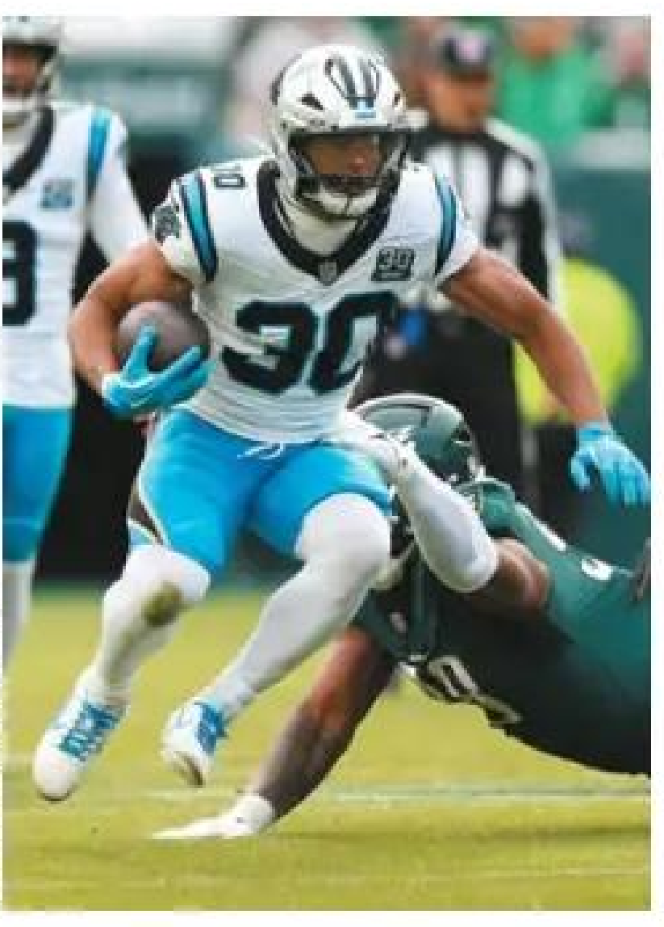
Young doesn't really qualify as a star, but the Panthers are short of big names and he at least showed some potential last year. Yes, he became only the fourth quarterback since 2000 to lose 20 of his first 25 starts, and yes, he was benched after his poor start to the season last year. But he showed mental toughness and character to come back from his benching and improve his play.

Young also has the added benefit of posing a credible threat with his legs, having scored six rushing touchdowns last year. His size (he is just 5'10") will always be pointed to by detractors, and there is nothing he can do about that, but the Panthers have brought nobody in to challenge him and have worked to give him a better supporting cast.

KEY PERSONNEL

CHUBA HUBBARD

RUNNING BACK



© Getty Images

Hubbard blossomed into a top running back last season, eclipsing the thousand-yard barrier in just 15 starts and showing ability as a pass-catcher out of the backfield as well. A good ground game is a quarterback's best friend, so more of the same is needed this year.

JA'TAVION SANDERS

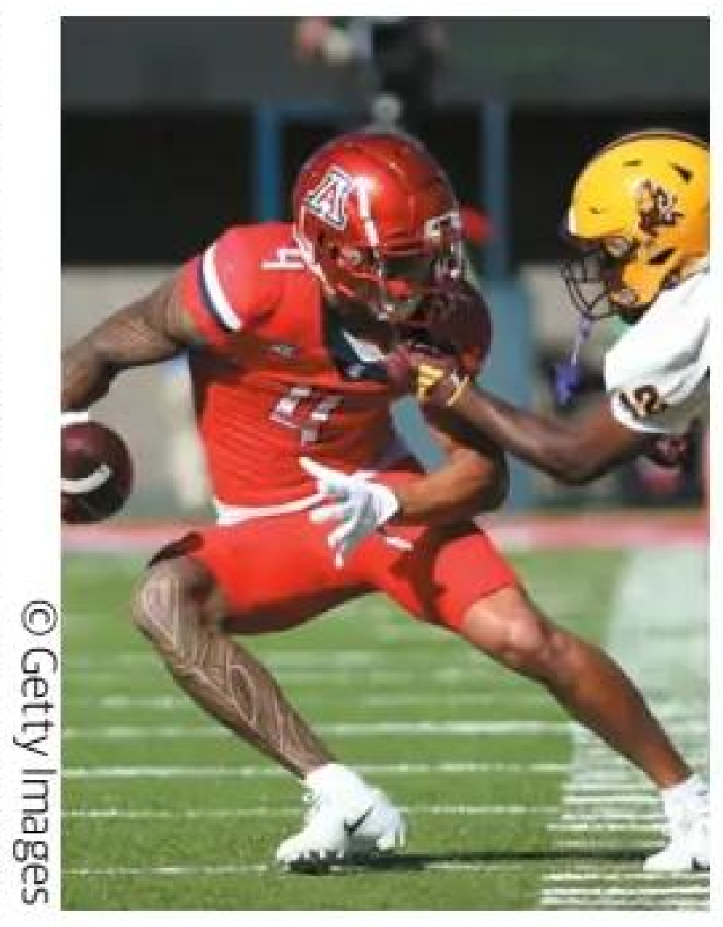
TIGHT END

© Getty Images

Sanders' rookie season was not spectacular, but he is another young Panther who showed flashes of potential. He contributed 33 catches on just 43 targets (an excellent 76.7 per cent catch rate) and could step up to full-time-starter status this year. Not bad at all for a fourth-round draft pick.

TETAIROA MCMILLAN

WIDE RECEIVER



© Getty Images

For the second year in a row, the Panthers have tried to find a top target for Bryce Young in the first round of the NFL draft. Xavier Legette did not set the world on fire last year, but McMillan just might. At 6'4", he's a big target with a huge catch radius and smooth moves, with the potential to become a star player.

A'SHAWN ROBINSON

DEFENSIVE END

© Getty Images

Robinson led the Panthers with 5.5 sacks last year – it might not sound like much, but he made just 3.5 in the previous five seasons combined, so it was actually something of a breakout performance for his first season in Carolina. He also added a career-high 80 tackles, so here's hoping that he continues to improve this season.

2024

HIGHLIGHT OF THE SEASON

The brightest moments in Carolina's season came at the end. It is possible to say they meant little, but a franchise desperate for something to believe in will take what it can get, and Bryce Young's final three weeks were truly impressive.

First he led them to a 36-point offensive explosion in Week 16, against Arizona, with a 21-yard touchdown from Chuba Hubbard winning the game in overtime. After a disappointing loss to the Buccaneers (in which Young still posted a passer rating of 100.7) there was another offensive outburst in the final week, where he completed 73.5 per cent of his passes on the way to another OT victory, this time by a score of 44-38 over Atlanta.

In total, Young had passed for 612 yards and seven touchdowns (adding three more rushing scores) with no interceptions in guiding the Panthers to a 2-1 mark to close out the season. Ending on an upswing, even one as modest as this, always make the offseason a little more bearable, and Panthers fans would take that level of performance from their young quarterback every day of the week.

© Getty Images

NEW ORLEANS SAINTS

It looks like the blues are sticking around for at least another year in New Orleans

Few teams are in such a bleak spot as the Saints. Their huge investment in Derek Carr has blown up in their face, as he has opted to retire rather than have season-ending shoulder surgery. He was far from great in New Orleans, but he was at least a legitimate quarterback with potential to step up a level.

Now the team is left with Spencer Rattler, who lost all six of his starts last year, and second-round draft pick Tyler Shough. It is unlikely that either will offer much this season. The Saints can't lean on a solid ground game, either, because although Alvin Kamara remains a versatile, two-way threat, he is not the kind of back to take over a game. Perhaps an improved offensive line, with first-round draft pick Kelvin Banks Jr contributing, might help. Elsewhere, there have been questionable decisions from the front office. Rather than going in for a full rebuild, they have splashed money on marginal talents. Chase Young's 2024 prove-it season was not impressive (just 5.5 sacks) but he was given a three-year, $51 million deal. Tight end Juwan Johnson also got a deal (three-years, $30 million) that does not seem to tally with his mediocre production.

Defensively, how much longer can the team rely on Demario Davis to hold things together? He is a marvel of consistency, but must surely start to decline soon. Justin Reid has been brought in at safety, but the team was already solid there – what they really need is a dominating pass-rusher, but they are not easy to find. Third-round draft pick Vernon Broughton adds bulk to the defensive line, but he is not a threat as a pass-rusher.

> "Rather than going in for a full rebuild, the Saints have splashed money on marginal talents"

ESTABLISHED **1966**

HEAD COACH **KELLEN MOORE**

STADIUM **CAESARS SUPERDOME**

DIVISION **NFC SOUTH**

RIVALS **ATLANTA FALCONS**

2024 RECORD **5-12**

2025 SCHEDULE **0.419**

★★ **HONOURS** ★★

DIVISION
1991, 2000, 2006, 2009, 2011, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020

CONFERENCE
2009

LEAGUE
2009

© Getty Images

STAR PLAYER **CHRIS OLAVE**

DOB: **27 JUNE 2000** POS: **WIDE RECEIVER** NO. **12**

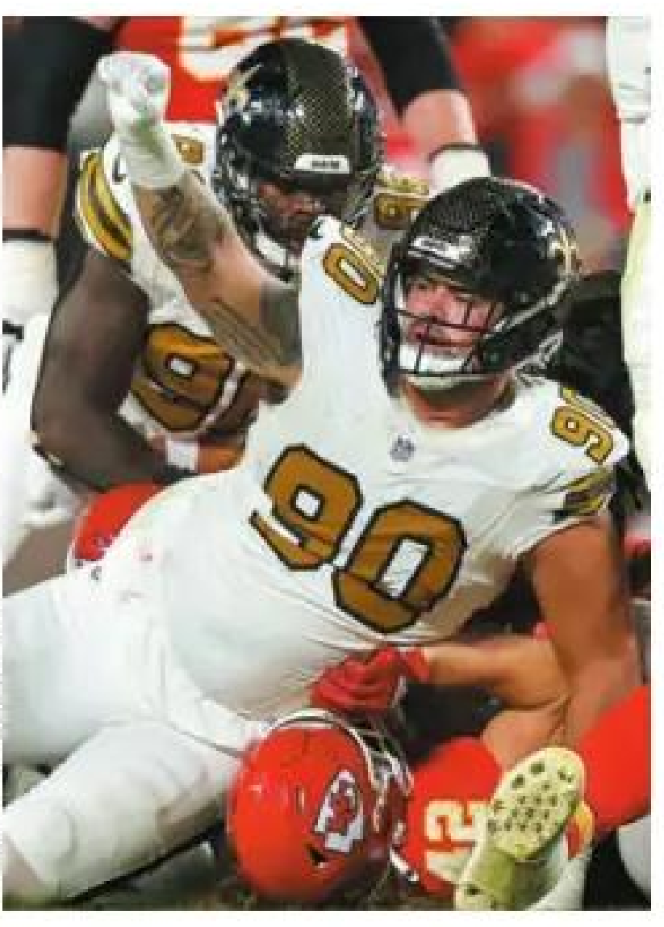
★ **Olave is a bona fide threat as a wide receiver, and the team has picked up his fifth-year option, but he suffered from concussions last season and that is something that can quickly derail a career.**

The Saints badly need him to stay healthy this year as they try to find their quarterback of the future. With him playing just eight games last season the passing offense disappeared, and his 32 catches were by far the lowest mark of his three-year career so far.

His biggest issue this season, aside from avoiding another concussion, will be working with questionable talent at the quarterback position. There is the feeling that the Saints are wasting a genuine star player, but if one of the potential quarterbacks catches fire, Olave will be there to reap the benefits.

KEY PERSONNEL

BRYAN BRESEE
DEFENSIVE TACKLE



© Getty Images

Bresee is developing as a disruptive force on the defensive line. He didn't have a smashing debut as a rookie, but last year he started to flash more often and led the team with 7.5 sacks. It was a big improvement, due to a better understanding of the game in his second year.

DEMARIO DAVIS
LINEBACKER

© Getty Images

What can be said about Davis that hasn't already been said? His durability is astounding, having just completed his eighth consecutive season with at least 100 tackles. And what sort of player produces a career-best number of tackles at the age of 35? A very rare one.

JUWAN JOHNSON
TIGHT END

© Getty Images

New head coach Kellen Moore clearly sees untapped potential in Johnson, because his $30 million contract seems excessive given his production so far (146 catches over his first five seasons), but he has steadily improved since moving to tight end in his third year.

TYLER SHOUGH
QUARTERBACK

© Getty Images

Shough has an unusual amount of experience for a rookie quarterback – he will be 26 in his first season, after playing parts of seven college seasons. His intelligence is demonstrated by already having two degrees and a Master's, but the Saints are more enamoured of his big-league arm.

2024

HIGHLIGHT OF THE SEASON

It's difficult to remember how promising the Saints season looked at one point. They opened up like potential champions, powering to a 30-0 lead over the Panthers in the first half of their first game. In particular, Derek Carr looked like an MVP in waiting, tossing three touchdowns in that first half, and connecting with emerging third-year receiver Rashid Shaheed on a 59-yard touchdown on their very first drive of the season. They won with ease, 47-10, and the next week was just as good. Against the Cowboys, they opened up another big lead in the first half, going ahead 35-13 on the back of two more Carr passing touchdowns. Shaheed caught another long-range score, this time from 70 yards as New Orleans won 44-19.

The Saints were not so much marching in, as roaring off from the starting line… but it was all a mirage. They failed to post as many as 20 points in ten of their remaining games and Shaheed was lost to a Week 6 knee injury. Still, the fireworks were pretty while they lasted.

© Getty Images

WILSON
6
SHAHEED
22

© Getty Images

TAMPA BAY BUCCANEERS

The Bucs need only small improvements as they continue to dominate the division

When we were looking ahead to the 2024 season, we commented that the Bucs could probably win the NFC South with another 9-7 record. As it happens, we were right, but they added one more win, just to be safe.

2024 was another Jekyll and Hyde season for the Bucs, featuring four-game winning and losing streaks. Unlike 2023, however, Tampa Bay could not make any noise in the postseason, bowing out to the upstart Commanders in the Wild Card round, but this is a team that only needs a few upgrades to start really competing again.

One area that needs no attention is quarterback, where Baker Mayfield proved that his strong showing the previous season was not a one-off. He was superb in 2024, passing for 4,500 yards and 41 touchdowns and making the Pro Bowl for the second consecutive year.

There have been no big splashes in free agency, but the team has addressed a key need. As good as the passing offense was last year (it ranked third in the league in yardage), the pass defense was equally woeful (ranking 29th). The lack of an impact pass-rusher is a problem, as was the paucity of interceptions (just seven all year).

The Bucs have taken a chance on Haason Reddick, who held out for a big chunk of last season and was unmotivated when he did play. If he rediscovers his fire, he could be an effective pass-rusher and that would elevate the defense. Two edge players and two cornerbacks were also brought in via the draft.

The offense wasn't forgotten. With Mike Evans looking ageless, but also turning 32 before the season starts, the Ohio State wide receiver production line was tapped in the form of first-rounder Emeka Egbuka.

> "As good as the passing offense was last year, the pass defense was equally woeful"

ESTABLISHED **1974**

HEAD COACH **TODD BOWLES**

STADIUM **RAYMOND JAMES STADIUM**

DIVISION **NFC SOUTH**

RIVALS **CAROLINA PANTHERS**

2024 RECORD **10-7**

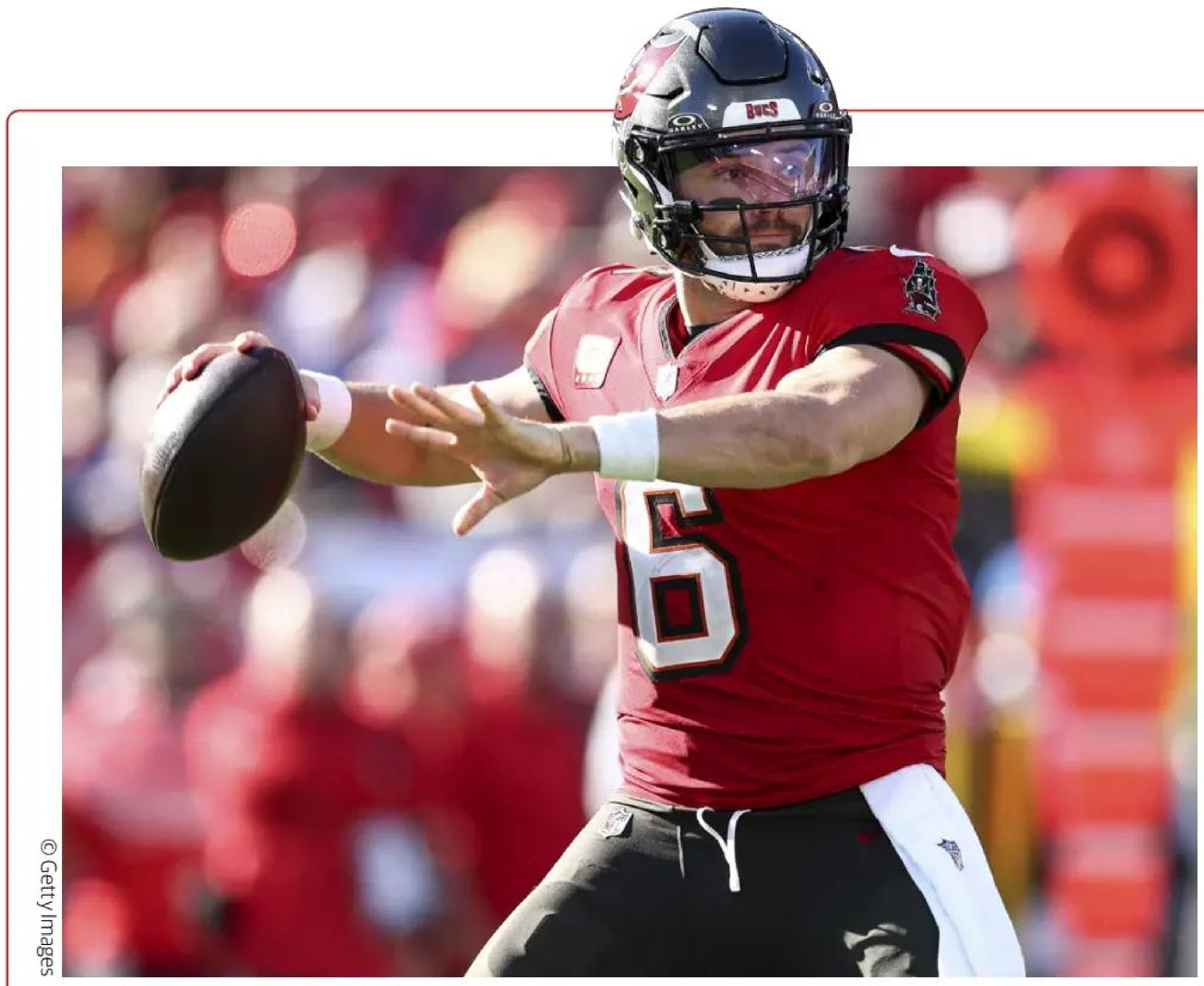
2025 SCHEDULE **0.481**

★★ HONOURS ★★

DIVISION
1979, 1981, 1999, 2002, 2005, 2007, 2021,2022, 2023, 2024

CONFERENCE
2002, 2020

LEAGUE
2002, 2020



© Getty Images

STAR PLAYER **BAKER MAYFIELD**

DOB: **14 APRIL 1995** POS: **QUARTERBACK** NO. **6**

There are many things to take into consideration when assessing a quarterback. One factor that is not often considered is the price – Mayfield gave the Bucs top-five quarterback pay last season, but he is ranked only 19th in terms of average salary per year. That is a bargain of spectacular proportions and gives the Bucs flexibility to keep other good players on the team.

Mayfield is part of a growing trend of quarterbacks who take a while to find their feet in the NFL, along with Geno Smith and Sam Darnold. Bucs fans love him for his toughness and competitive attitude, but he can also be a destroyer on his day – he had eight games with three or more touchdown passes last year and his 41 touchdown passes was second best in the league.

KEY PERSONNEL

BUCKY IRVING

RUNNING BACK

© Getty Images

Fourth-round draft picks are not supposed to perform like Irving did last year. After a steady start, he picked up momentum from midseason, turning out three 100-yard games in the last six weeks and finishing with 1,122 yards. He excels at gathering yardage after contact and forced 76 missed tackles.

MIKE EVANS

WIDE RECEIVER

© Getty Images

Evans only just kept his streak of 1,000-yard seasons alive, but that was because he missed three games in the middle of the year. It was a relatively quiet season, but he was a steady target for Baker Mayfield and may benefit from the attention drawn by Emeka Egbuka this year.

LAVONTE DAVID

LINEBACKER

© Getty Images

The Bucs have entered a pay-as-you-go phase with David, awarding him another one-year contract (worth $14 million) after he did so well last year on a one-year deal. This is understandable given that he is entering his 14th season, but the man just keeps on producing. He had 122 tackles last year.

CALIJAH KANCEY

DEFENSIVE END

© Getty Images

Kancey's progress has been hampered by a calf injury that cost him eight games over his first two seasons, but he has flashed real ability and is full of confidence – he believes he could lead the league in sacks if he stays healthy this coming season.

2024

HIGHLIGHT OF THE SEASON

In the last minute of the last game of the season, Mike Evans was sitting on 995 receiving yards. An incompletion by Spencer Rattler had turned the ball over on downs, but with just 36 ticks left on the clock, there was no time for any mistakes.

Tampa Bay had already wrapped up the game and Baker Mayfield could have simply taken a knee to run out the clock and begin preparations for a playoff game, but there were no such thoughts. Everyone in the stadium, including the 11 New Orleans defenders who were on the field, knew that Evans was going to be targeted.

The pass was short, and Evans hauled it in just two yards downfield, but he was able to plant his left foot, cut back inside and jink his way to a nine-yard gain to give himself 1,004 yards for the season. The catch allowed Evans to tie Jerry Rice's record of 11 consecutive thousand-yard seasons.

"That's one of the greatest things I've seen in a long time," said Tom Brady from the announcers' booth.

© Getty Images

HARRISON JR
CARDINALS

© Getty Images

ARIZONA CARDINALS

The Cardinals have made a commitment to improve on defense in 2025

For a while last season, folks in Arizona were starting to get excited – a four-game winning streak in mid-season seemingly had them primed for a playoff push, at 6-4. They then won just one of their next six games to sink back into the obscurity that has been their home since their last postseason appearance, in 2021.

The season was the story of an underachieving offense paired with an overachieving defense. There were great individual performances on the offensive side, but the team ultimately struggled to put points on the board. The defense, meanwhile, was short on big names but functioned well as a unit.

In the offseason, the emphasis has been firmly on improving the defense – clearly the feeling is the offense can do better with another season of continuity, while the defense cannot be counted on to punch above its weight again.

Last year's top draft pick, Darius Robinson, played in only six games due to an injury picked up in training camp and he will be joined by another No. 1 selection, defensive lineman Walter Nolen. Six of the Cardinals' seven draft picks were defenders, and second-round corner Will Johnson may make the biggest impact of all, at least early on.

The line was boosted in free-agency as well, with Super Bowl hero Josh Sweat coming in on a big deal (four years, $76.4 million) and Dalvin Tomlinson getting a two-year deal. Clearly, the Cardinals want to increase the pressure on opposing quarterbacks, who too often last season had time to survey the field and pick a weak spot. One area that was definitely not a weak spot was safety, where Budda Baker made 164 tackles on his way to being the only Pro Bowler on the unit.

> "Clearly the feeling is the offense can do better with another season of continuity"

ESTABLISHED **1898**

HEAD COACH **JONATHAN GANNON**

STADIUM **STATE FARM STADIUM**

DIVISION **NFC WEST**

RIVALS **SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS**

2024 RECORD **8-9**

2025 SCHEDULE **0.457**

★★ **HONOURS** ★★

DIVISION
1947, 1948, 1974, 1975, 2008, 2009, 2015

CONFERENCE
2008

LEAGUE
1925, 1947

© Getty Images

STAR PLAYER **TREY MCBRIDE**

DOB: **22 NOVEMBER 1999** POS: **TIGHT END** NO. **85**

★ **In three seasons, McBride has established himself as one of the top tight ends in the game.** He ranked second at the position in both receptions (111) and yards (1,146) and maybe the only weakness in his season was the same one that plagued the Cardinals' offense as a whole – he only scored two receiving touchdowns despite all those catches (he did add two more scores on a running play and a fumble recovery).

McBride was a second-round draft pick, so his rookie contract would have expired after this coming season. The Cardinals were not about to take the risk and allow that to happen, and so they made him the highest-paid tight end in league history with a four-year, $76 million extension.

KEY PERSONNEL

GARRETT WILLIAMS
CORNERBACK

© Getty Images

In his second season, Williams took huge strides towards becoming a lockdown corner. He started 11 games as opposed to six in his rookie year, and defended nine passes as opposed to two. His solid play helped the Cardinals defense rank fifth in passing touchdowns allowed.

PARIS JOHNSON JR
OFFENSIVE TACKLE

© Getty Images

Johnson was another player to make strides in his second season. A knee injury cost him the last three games of the season, but he had established himself as a bright spot on the offensive line, switching from right tackle to the critical left spot and earning a nod as a Pro Bowl alternate.

JOSH SWEAT
DEFENSIVE END

© Getty Images

The Cards grabbed one of the biggest names available in free agency and will be hoping he can reproduce the form he showed in Philadelphia. With the Eagles he benefitted from great teammates on a stellar defensive line – can he be as effective in Arizona?

KYLER MURRAY
QUARTERBACK

© Getty Images

Murray's numbers were good, apart from only throwing 21 touchdowns in 17 starts (those 17 starts were an achievement in themselves, by the way). It seems that no matter what he does, people expect more, but there is nothing much wrong with 3,851 passing yards and another 572 on the ground.

2024

HIGHLIGHT OF THE SEASON

Things were looking good for Arizona early in the season, and that was never more true than in Week 2, when Kyler Murray put his incredible athleticism on display against the Rams. There are many NFL quarterbacks who can escape pressure in the pocket, but who else does it with the level of calm control that Murray exudes while being hunted down?

Already leading 14-0, he took a shotgun snap on a third-and-five from the Rams' 18-yard line, early in the second quarter. Initial coverage was good, and Jared Verse had time to navigate through a double-team to apply heat on Murray. A nifty spin got Murray free and he stepped up into the pocket, only to come under more pressure. Verse recovered quickly and had the Cardinals' quarterback in his grasp again, but Murray stepped out the second would-be sack and drifted left, his eyes downfield. Eventually, he found a target and drilled a pass to Elijah Higgins for an 18-yard score. The Cards won easily, 41-10, and their offense appeared to be humming.

© Getty Images

LOS ANGELES RAMS

Emerging talent, especially on defense, has hopes high once more for the Rams

© Getty Images

The Rams definitely had more than a few obstacles to overcome in 2024, but they fought and scratched their way to win their first division title since their Super Bowl-winning season of 2021.

Particularly impressive was the way they held their nerve after a dreadful 1-4 start to the campaign. Some teams would have panicked in that situation, but they went 4-1 in their next five games to right the ship.

The offensive firepower of a couple of seasons ago had started to fade, however, as Cooper Kupp aged and Puka Nacua suffered through injury problems. Both Kupp and Demarcus Robinson are gone from the receiving corps, but that will give Tutu Atwell a chance to step up and the team also brought in the still-dangerous Davante Adams in free agency. Meanwhile, a running game that was plodding at times has added the explosive Jarquez Hunter via the draft. He could add a jolt of electricity that was missing last year, when Kyren Williams was steady and productive, but lacked a home-run gear.

With Braden Fiske and Kobie Turner both looking like young studs on the defensive line, the defense has a solid foundation. A strong linebacking corps behind that line could vault it into the elite level if last year's rookie, Jared Verse, improves on his excellent first campaign.

The defensive secondary is an area where the team needs to improve, but little help has been brought in either through free agency or the draft. Quentin Lake played more slot corner than safety and became the quarterback of the unit, relaying plays from the sideline and piling up 111 tackles, more than twice as many as the previous season.

> "With Braden Fiske and Kobie Turner both looking like young studs on the defensive line, the defense has a solid foundation"

ESTABLISHED **1936**

HEAD COACH **SEAN MCVAY**

STADIUM **SOFI STADIUM**

DIVISION **NFC WEST**

RIVALS **SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS**

2024 RECORD **10-7**

2025 SCHEDULE **0.491**

★★ HONOURS ★★

DIVISION

1945, 1949, 1967, 1969, 1973, 1974, 1975, 1976, 1977, 1978, 1979, 1985, 1999, 2001, 2003, 2017, 2018, 2021, 2024

CONFERENCE

1950, 1951, 1955, 1979, 1999, 2001, 2018, 2021

LEAGUE

1945, 1951, 1999, 2021

© Getty Images

STAR PLAYER **JARED VERSE**

DOB: **4 NOVEMBER 2000** POS: **LINEBACKER** NO. **8**

★ **The Defensive Rookie of the Year (Braden Fiske finished third in the voting, underlining how much good young talent the Rams' defense has) was credited with 77 quarterback pressures to go with 18 quarterback hits and 4.5 sacks in the regular season.**

Just about the only weakness in his superb rookie campaign was a tendency to miss tackles – he let 21 ball-carriers get out of his grasp over the season, and that will be a point of emphasis as he prepares for 2025. Although Verse had most success with his speed-rush (he has an explosive first step), his game is built on more than that, as he already has a variety of moves and the ability to quickly change things up if his initial effort is countered.

KEY PERSONNEL

ALARIC JACKSON
OFFENSIVE TACKLE

© Getty Images

Jackson picked a good time to turn in his best season – just before he was due a new contract he stepped into the top rank of left tackles, giving up just 25 pressures and four quarterback hits all year. He was rewarded with a $56.3 million contract.

PUKA NACUA
WIDE RECEIVER

© Getty Images

Last season proved to be a frustrating one for Nacua, who was banged up and missed six games – still, he piled up an impressive 990 yards in just 11 outings and is now the clear No. 1 on the Rams, which was underlined when Cooper Kupp was allowed to walk from the team as a free agent.

BRADEN FISKE
DEFENSIVE END

© Getty Images

Fiske helped the Rams cope with the loss of Aaron Donald by turning in an excellent first season, which saw him lead the team in sacks with 8.5. Together with fellow end Kobie Turner, he gives the Rams a dynamic and young partnership on the defensive line.

MATTHEW STAFFORD
QUARTERBACK

© Getty Images

Stafford hasn't been able to replicate that first magical season with the Rams, when he passed for 41 TDs and led them to the Super Bowl, but he remains more than solid – 3,762 yards and only eight interceptions, with a completion rate of 65.8 per cent is plenty good enough to build around.

2024

HIGHLIGHT OF THE SEASON

Following a disappointing loss to the Eagles (a loss that would be duplicated in the postseason), the Rams were at 5-6 and at a crossroads. Either they could push through and challenge for the playoffs, or they could slip back into the crowd. The New Orleans Saints would be the visitors as the Rams attempted to get their year back on track.

Kyren Williams lacked explosiveness during the season, but he was a reliable workhorse and the Rams turned to him against the Saints. His numbers (just 15 carries) do not suggest he played an important part in the game, but most of those carries came in two intense bursts of activity. On a second-quarter drive he carried five consecutive times, and in the third quarter, he had seven carries in an 11-play drive that ended with his own four-yard touchdown, giving the Rams their first lead of the game. He added a key 14-yard dash on another touchdown drive and finished with 104 yards at a 6.9-yard average, his best mark of the season.

© Getty Images

SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS

The 49ers are hoping to bounce back from a nightmare season

© Getty Images

It is fair to say that 2024 did not go according to plan for the Niners. A miserable combination of holdouts, injuries and underperformance saw them finish in the cellar of the NFC West when they were widely tipped to be division champions. Too much went wrong to catalogue everything here, but the wide receiver room was a microcosm of the team's woes.

Expected to be the best collection of receivers in the Kyle Shanahan era, it fell apart as Brandon Aiyuk held out and then got injured, Deebo Samuel turned up overweight and out of sorts, and top draft pick Ricky Pearsall was shot before the season even started. The emergence of Jauan Jennings was a bright spot, and also symbolic of the team as a whole – there is still the talent to pull things back together quickly. It will be a struggle, though, because the Niners were absolutely plundered in free agency. Aaron Banks, Charvarius Ward, Javon Hargrave, Jaylon Moore, Talanoa Hufanga, Dre Greenlaw, Leonard Floyd, Maliek Collins and Isaac Yiadom combined for 81 starts last season, but they are all gone.

Not much help has arrived via free agency, with receiver Demarcus Robinson and blocking tight end Luke Farrell the most likely to contribute. That leaves the defense looking very thin, and it had struggled last season even before all the defections. The draft therefore saw the first five picks all go to the defense, but there were no obvious home-run picks (although it will take a few years to fairly assess them). Immediate impacts will be needed by players like Mykel Williams, Alfred Collins and CJ West (all defensive linemen) if the team is to strengthen its run defense.

> "The wide receiver room was a microcosm of the team's woes in 2024"

ESTABLISHED **1944**

HEAD COACH **KYLE SHANAHAN**

STADIUM **LEVI'S STADIUM**

DIVISION **NFC WEST**

RIVALS **LOS ANGELES RAMS**

2024 RECORD **6-11**

2025 SCHEDULE **0.415**

★★ **HONOURS** ★★

DIVISION
1970, 1971, 1972, 1981, 1983, 1984, 1986, 1987, 1988, 1989, 1990, 1992, 1993, 1994, 1995, 1997, 2002, 2011, 2012, 2019, 2022, 2023

CONFERENCE
1981, 1984, 1988, 1989, 1994, 2012, 2019, 2023

LEAGUE
1981, 1984, 1988, 1989, 1994

© Getty Images

STAR PLAYER **BROCK PURDY**

DOB: **27 DECEMBER 1999** POS: **QUARTERBACK** NO. **13**

★ **For some reason, there always seems to be a question hanging over Purdy's head.** That probably comes with the territory of being Mr Irrelevant, but at some point the football world needs to just accept that this is a really good quarterback and stop waiting for him to fall back to earth.

Last year he showed that he could remain effective amid the turmoil that comes from multiple injuries, and he gave the Niners a puncher's chance all year. This was especially notable in the final weeks, when all hopes of making the postseason had vanished. He passed for 690 yards and five touchdowns in his last two appearances, both defeats. A healthy and motivated receiver room could work wonders for him this season, and he can always rely on tight end George Kittle.

KEY PERSONNEL

DEOMMODORE LENOIR
DEFENSIVE BACK

© Getty Images

Lenoir earned a massive contract extension last season, inking a five-year, $88.9 million extension in November. It was a fair reward for a player who established himself as a quality starter in his second season and has continued to improve each year.

GEORGE KITTLE
TIGHT END

© Getty Images

Amid the chaos of last season, Kittle stood like a rock, a consistent target for Brock Purdy and often the focal point of the offense, as well as its emotional leader. Understandably, the 49ers did not want to imagine life without him, so they made him the highest-paid tight end in history.

JAUAN JENNINGS
WIDE RECEIVER

© Getty Images

Jennings grabbed his opportunity (and 77 passes) with both hands when the 49ers receiving corps fell apart last year. Having signed a modest two-year deal prior to the season, he completely outperformed it and will be looking for a payday if he replicates his near-thousand-yard performance this year.

NICK BOSA
DEFENSIVE END

© Getty Images

Bosa's production has slipped, but the hope is that under returning defensive coordinator Robert Saleh, and with the help of Mykel Williams, he can return to his terrorising best. He's still young enough to rebuild the defensive line around and his elite technique means he is still a formidable pass-rusher.

2024

HIGHLIGHT OF THE SEASON

We kind of brushed past Ricky Pearsall in our introduction – yes, he was the victim of a shooting in the preseason, and it naturally slowed his development in the league, but as a first-round draft pick there is still plenty of potential there and he gave us all a tantalising glimpse of that potential in Week 17 last year.

The 49ers had waited a long time for their top rookie to make an impact. After missing the first six games, he eased his way into the system with a few nice contributions, but against Detroit he went off in a major way.

He caught eight out of ten targets, good for 141 yards as the Niners battled the Lions down to the wire. It was the most receiving yards by a 49ers rookie since the great Jerry Rice managed 241 in 1985.

He opened the scoring on a three-yard pass from Brock Purdy and went on to feature in every single 49ers possession (as a receiver, runner or even as a passer on one play), showing how integral he could become if he develops as hoped.

© Getty Images

© Getty Images

SEATTLE SEAHAWKS

In a risky move, Sam Darnold has been given the keys to the Seattle offense

Seattle's brave new world after the Pete Carroll era started well, and in any other year their ten wins would have got them into the postseason (they are the first such team to lose out in the 17-game era). Even more encouraging was the fact that they finished so strongly, and Mike Macdonald showed he has some real talent despite his youth.

If the Seahawks had started better, they would almost certainly have made the playoffs, but a 4-5 start dug them into a hole and the Week 5 loss to a woeful Giants team was especially egregious. As it was, a 6-2 finish was not quite enough, but it showcased some strong decision-making on the part of Macdonald. First of all, he rejigged his linebacking corps when it struggled early, introducing rookie Tyrice Knight. The defense overall was greatly improved on 2023's version, but it was especially impressive over the second half of the season (they ranked third in points-per-game allowed over the final nine weeks).

An awful lot now depends on another Jets cast-off at quarterback. After resurrecting his career in Seattle, Geno Smith has moved on, and Sam Darnold is the new man in town.

He is one of three big-ticket free agents (along with Cooper Kupp and DeMarcus Lawrence) being counted on to push the Hawks over the top.

It might all be for nothing, though, if the team doesn't sort out its troublesome offensive line, which would in turn help to revive a dormant running game. First-round draftee Grey Zabel is not expected to start immediately, but has great potential at any of the three interior linemen spots. New offensive coordinator Klint Kubiak is being counted on to improve things here.

> "After resurrecting his career in Seattle, Geno Smith has moved on, and Sam Darnold is the new man in town"

ESTABLISHED **1974**

HEAD COACH **MIKE MACDONALD**

STADIUM **LUMEN FIELD**

DIVISION **NFC WEST**

RIVALS **SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS**

2024 RECORD **10-7**

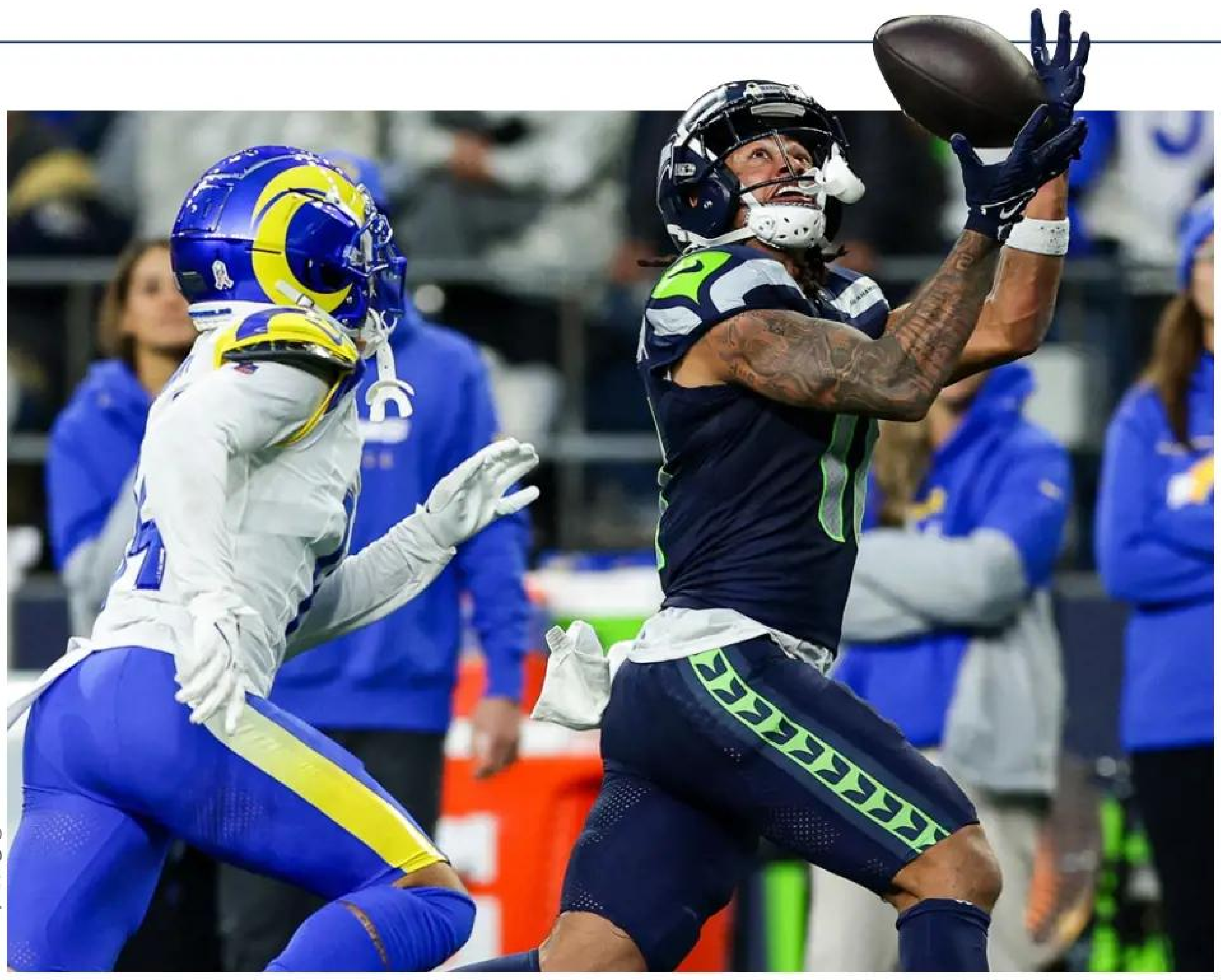
2025 SCHEDULE **0.474**

★★ **HONOURS** ★★

DIVISION
1988, 1999, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2010, 2013, 2014, 2016, 2020

CONFERENCE
2005, 2013, 2014

LEAGUE
2013



© Getty Images

STAR PLAYER **JAXON SMITH-NJIGBA**

DOB: **14 FEBRUARY 2002** POS: **WIDE RECEIVER** NO. **11**

★ **Yes, the Seahawks handed a big deal to Sam Darnold, but until he proves himself, Smith-Njigba is the big man in the Seattle offense.** He enjoyed a great sophomore season, and the team will be hoping that he can quickly develop chemistry with his new quarterback.

Smith-Njigba made significant strides, improving his catch rate from 67.7 per cent to 73.0, bumping his number of catches from 63 to an even 100 and blowing through the thousand-yard barrier for the first time.

He will need to be just as good again now that DK Metcalf has departed, taking his 438 career receptions with him, and how Smith-Njigba adjusts to being the focal point of a passing defense will be interesting – because until Cooper Kupp proves he is still a threat, Smith-Njigba will be battling with double-teams.

KEY PERSONNEL

LEONARD WILLIAMS

DEFENSIVE END

© Getty Images

In his first full season with Seattle, Williams put together arguably his best season to date. His 11 sacks saw him voted to the Pro Bowl for the first time since 2016 and in the offseason, he helped clear cap space to bring in new talent by restructuring his contract with the team.

JULIAN LOVE

SAFETY

© Getty Images

Love joined the Seahawks in 2023. After just one season they inked him to a three-year extension worth $33 million, and they had no regrets after a superb 2024 campaign that saw him lead the team with 109 combined tackles. He started every game and looks like becoming the next great Seahawks safety.

TYRICE KNIGHT

LINEBACKER

© Getty Images

Seahawks fans quickly woke up to Knight's abilities when he repeatedly flashed in early-season games. When Macdonald shook up his underperforming linebackers around the midseason point, he was given his chance and responded with 65 tackles in the final eight games.

SAM DARNOLD

QUARTERBACK

© Getty Images

New Seahawks' quarterback Darnold has a lot to prove this season. He has never had a season anywhere near as good as his 2024 campaign, and he fizzled towards the end of the year... but the Seahawks are counting on him to find consistency in this, his fifth stop in the NFL.

2024

HIGHLIGHT OF THE SEASON

Nothing quite beats the feeling of sticking it to your old team. Leonard Williams' time with the Jets ended way back in 2019, but you can bet the Week 13 trip to MetLife Stadium was circled on his calendar as soon as the 2024 schedule came out.

The return home was not going according to plan, as the struggling Jets had opened up a 21-7 lead by the time Williams made his big contribution in the second quarter. With Aaron Rodgers pressing for another score on a 3rd and 8 from Seattle's ten-yard line, Williams surprised the Jets by dropping into a shallow zone. First he tipped the pass intended for Garrett Wilson, then he caught it and rode an attempted tackle from Xavier Gipson.

Showing incredible speed, Williams then headed down the sideline with only the second interception of his NFL career, and did not stop until he'd reached the opposite end zone, giving him a stunning 92-yard scoring return that changed the momentum of the game and set the Seahawks on course for a stunning comeback win.

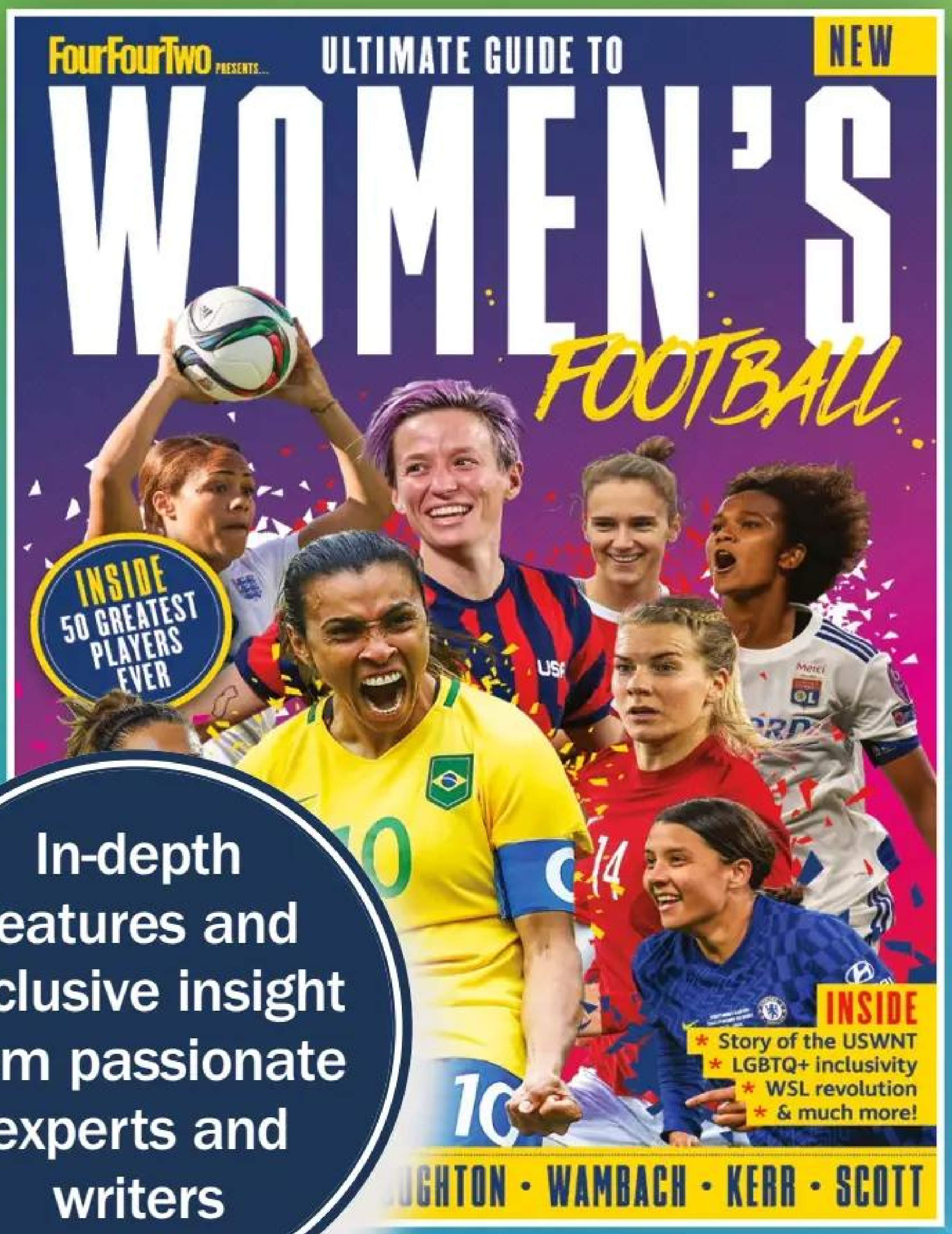
© Getty Images

★ The Eagles celebrate after their 40-22 victory over the Chiefs at Super Bowl LIX

© Getty Images

SUPER BOWL
Champions
CAESAR
FOR MORE
BUD LIGHT
BUD LIGHT
EAGLES
65
SUPER BOWL CHAMPIONS

SUPERDOME
SUPER BOWL
JALEN HURT
17-22 COMP-ATT
221 PASS YARDS
72 RUSH YARDS
BUD LIGHT
25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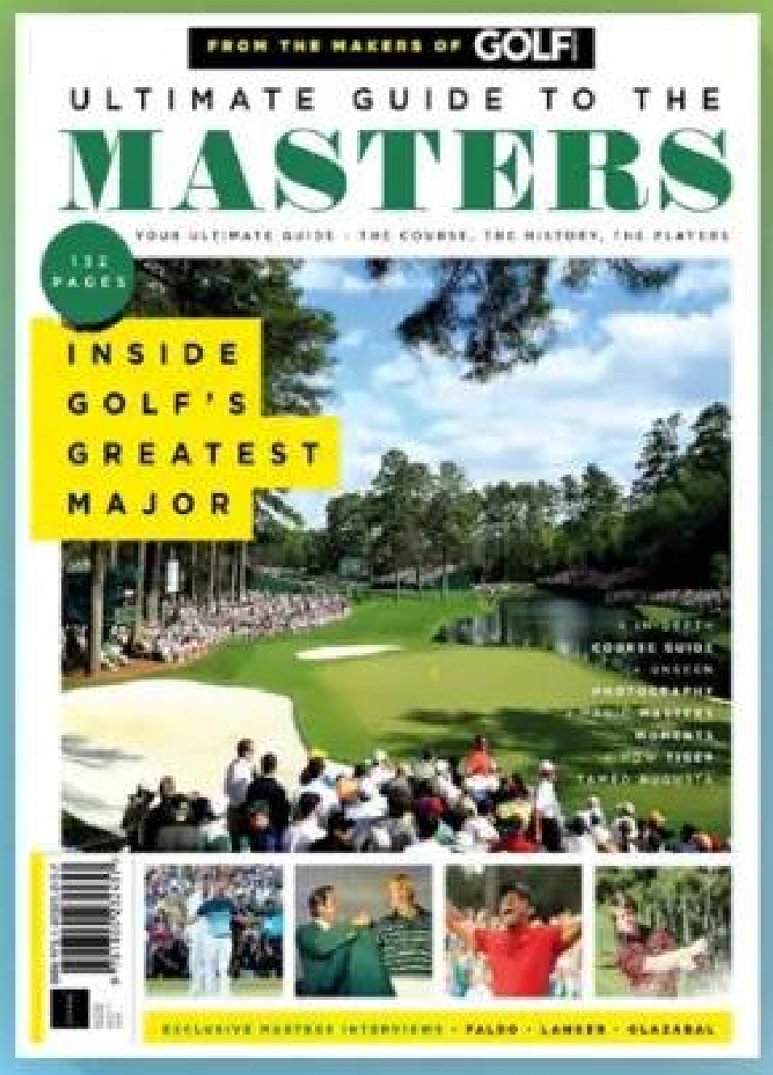
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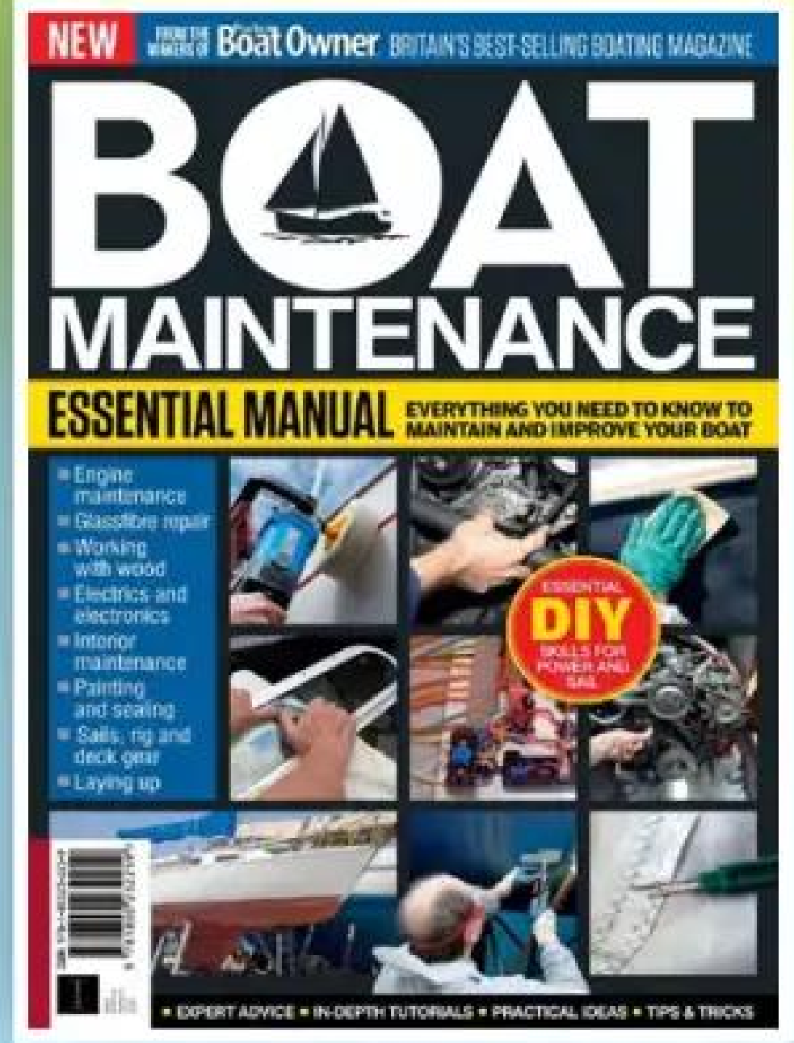
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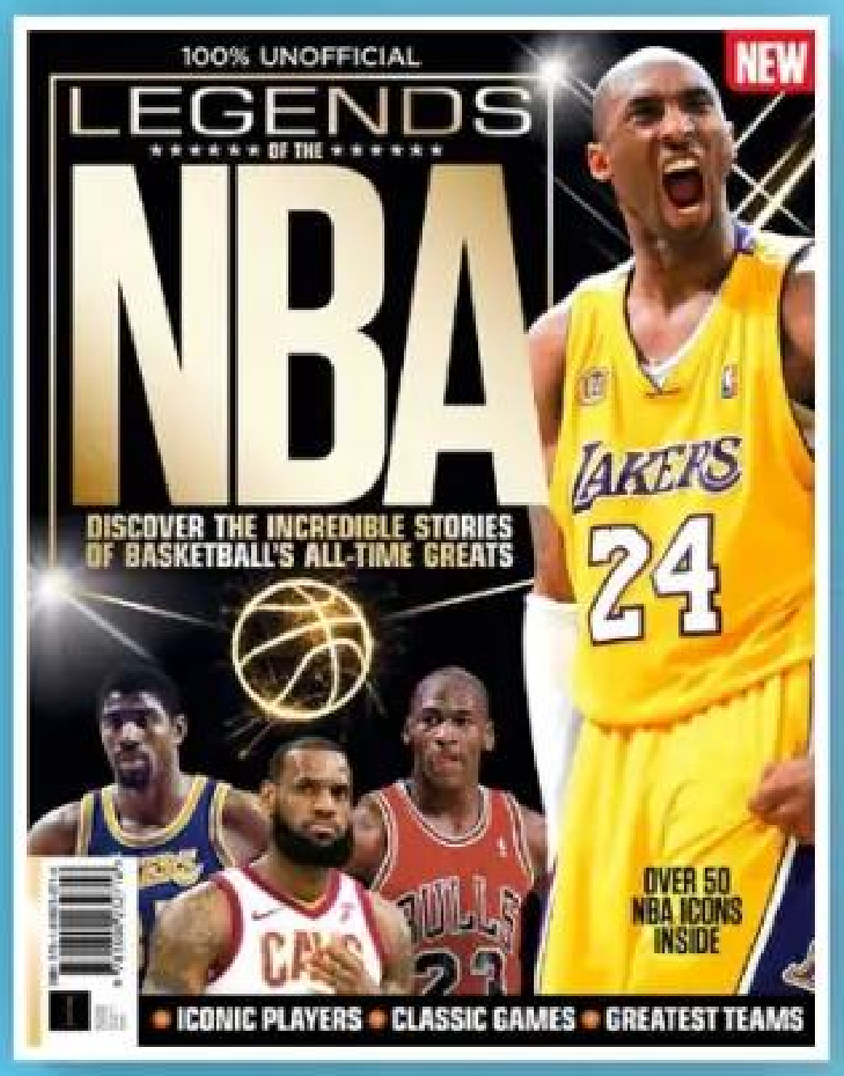
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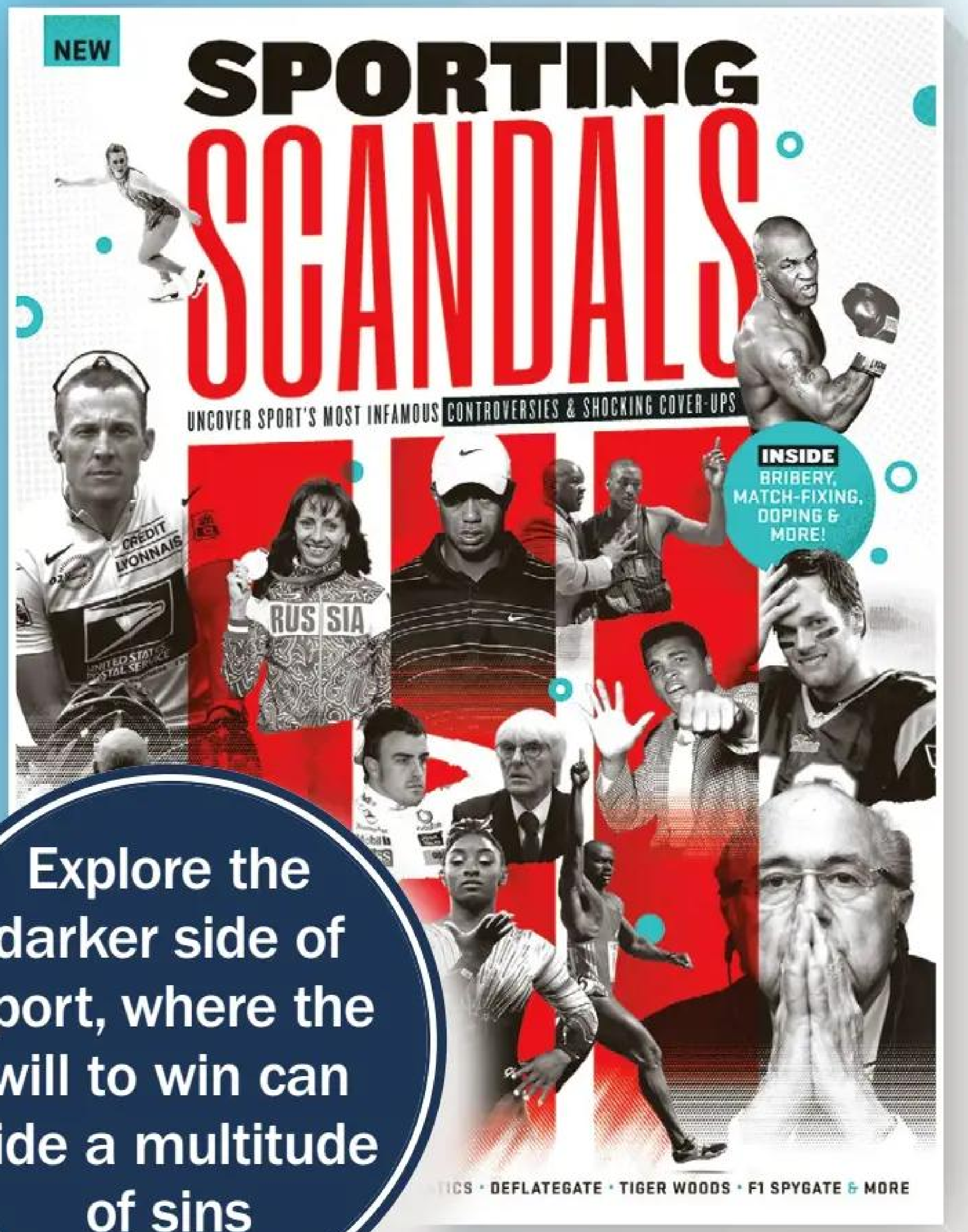
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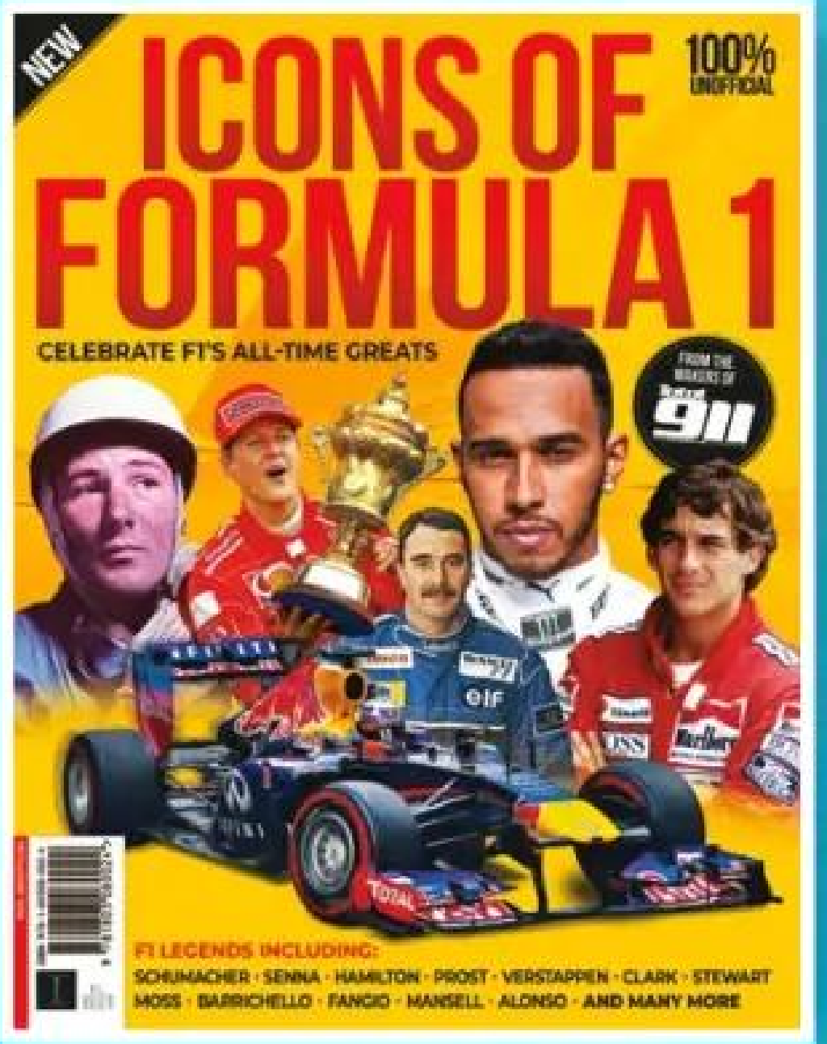
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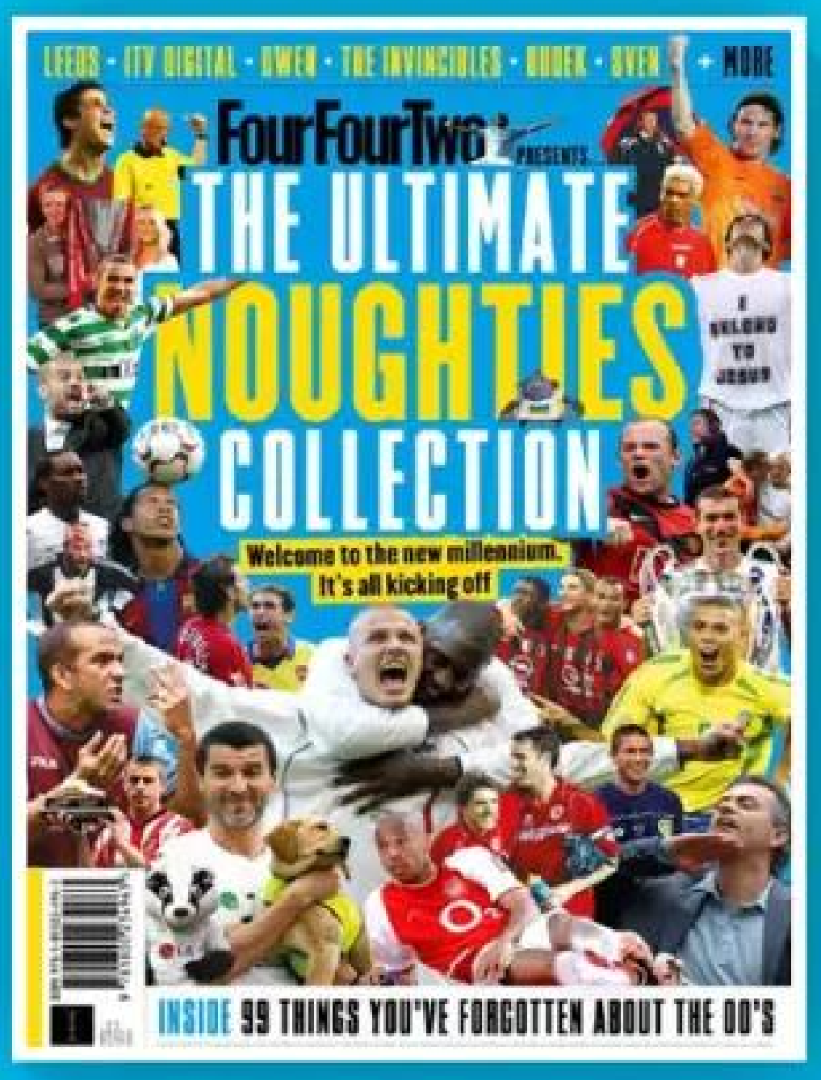
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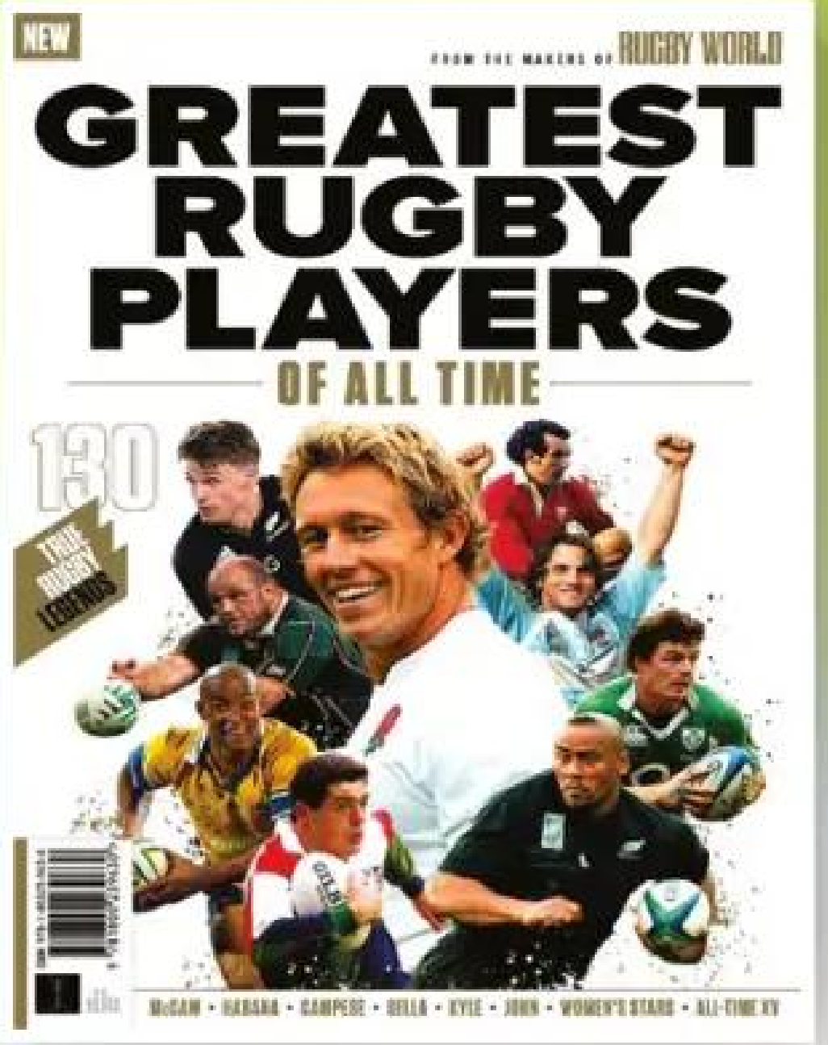
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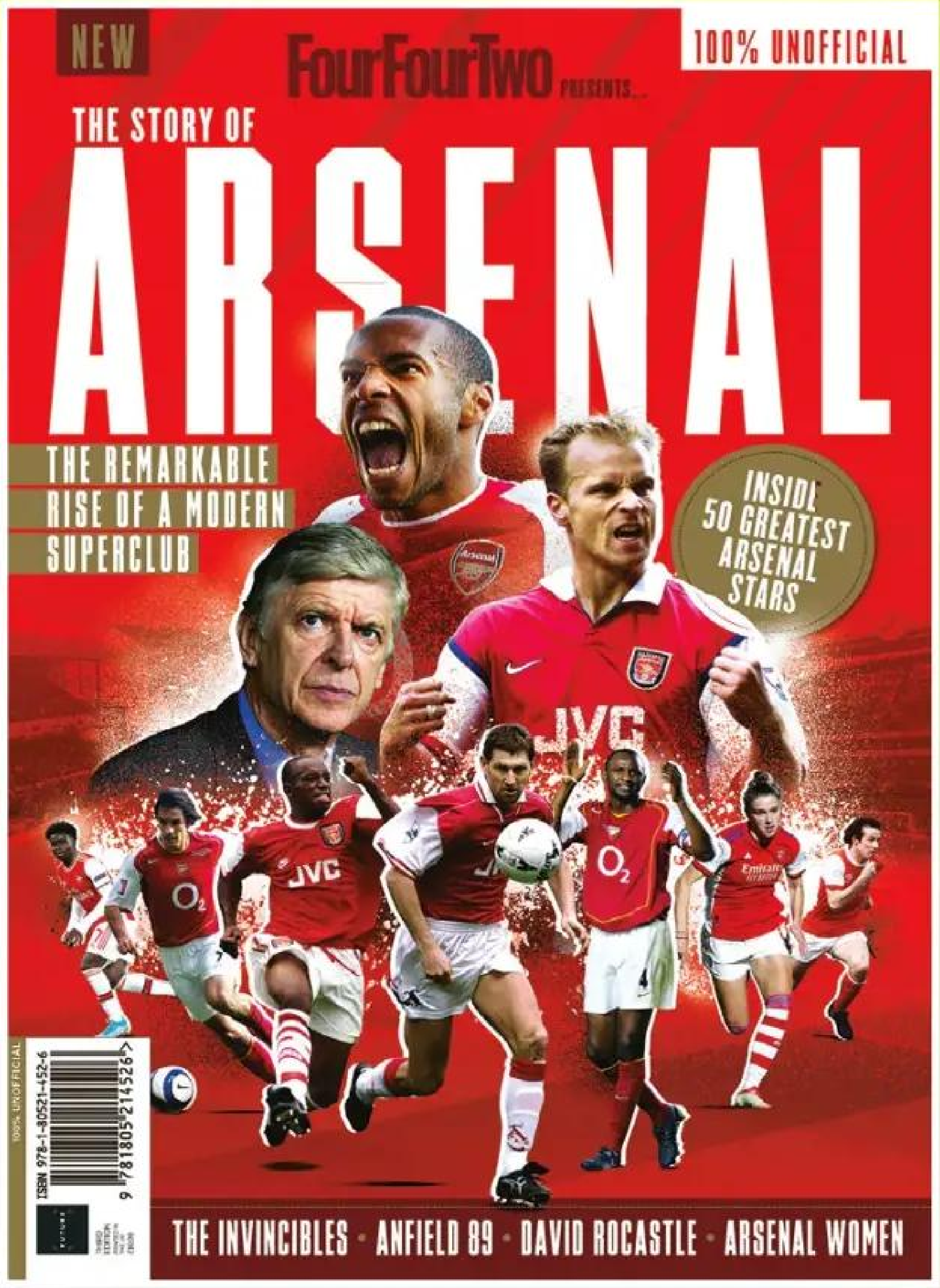
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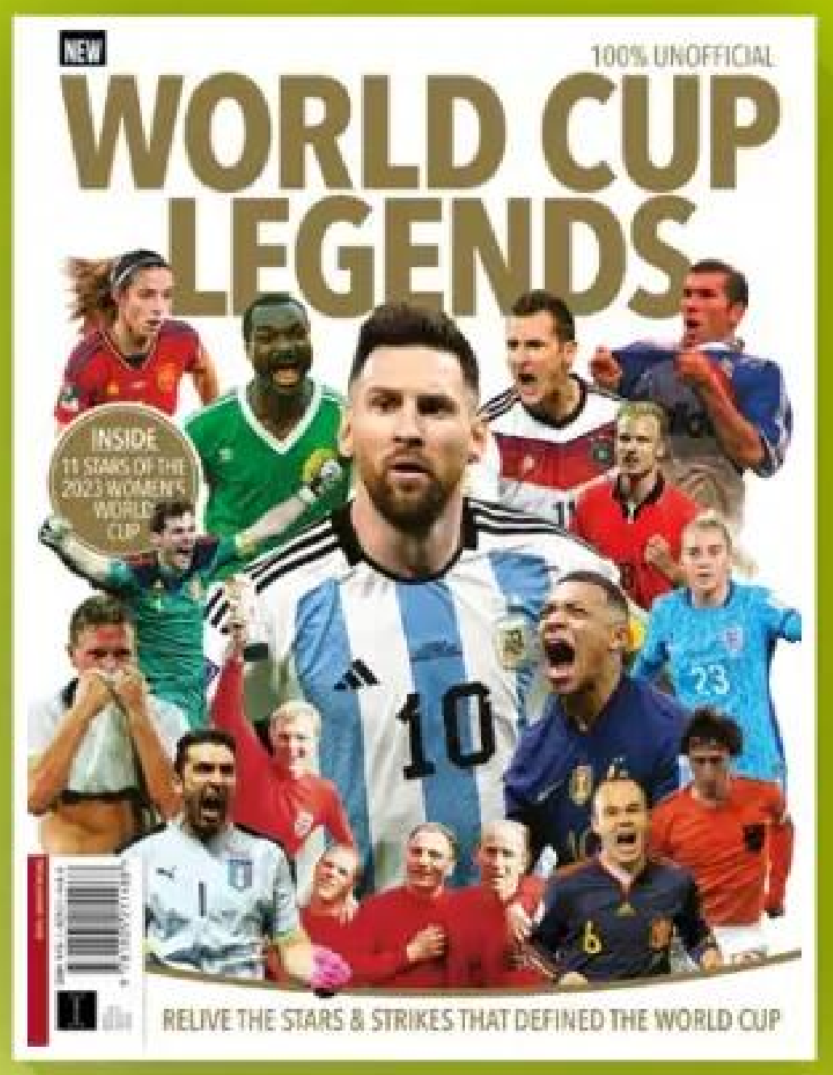
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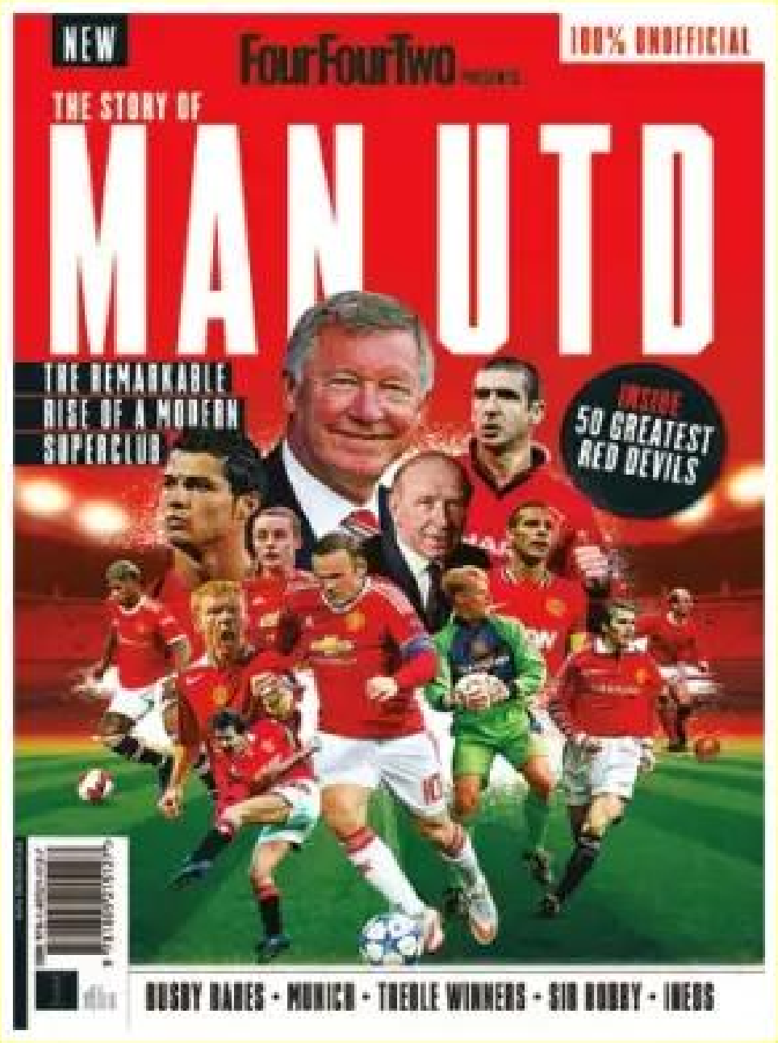
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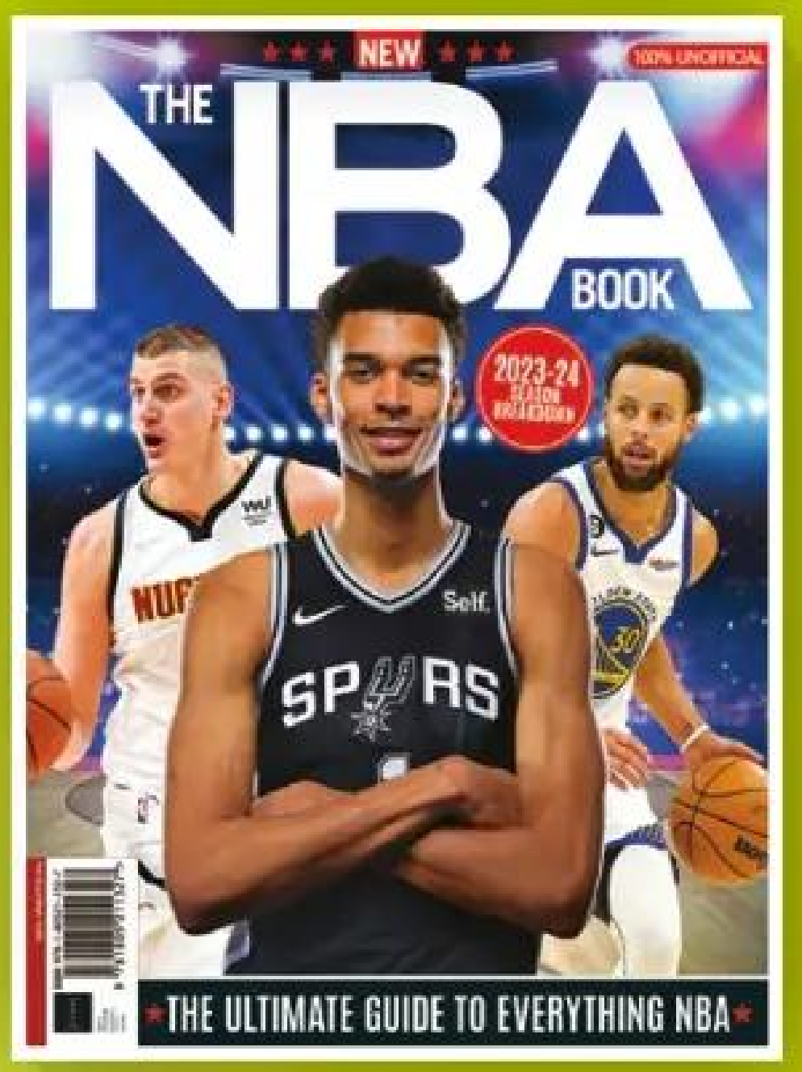
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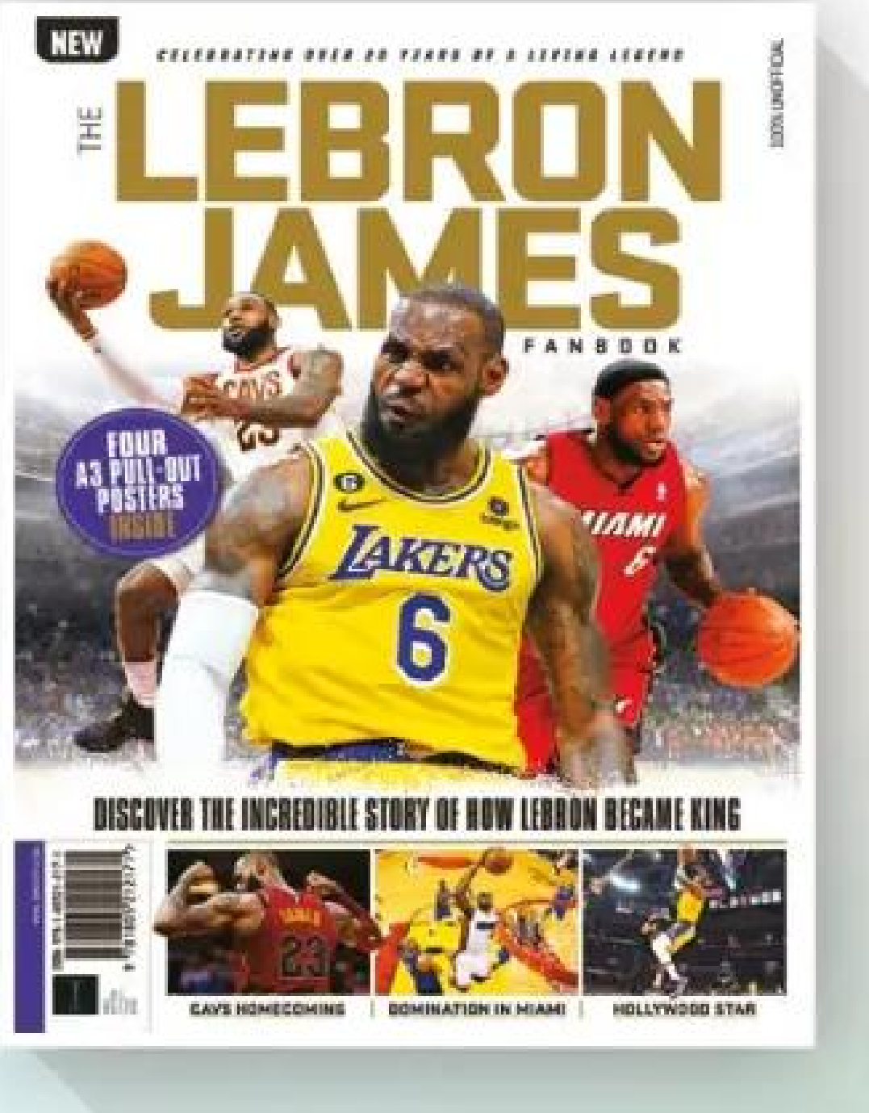
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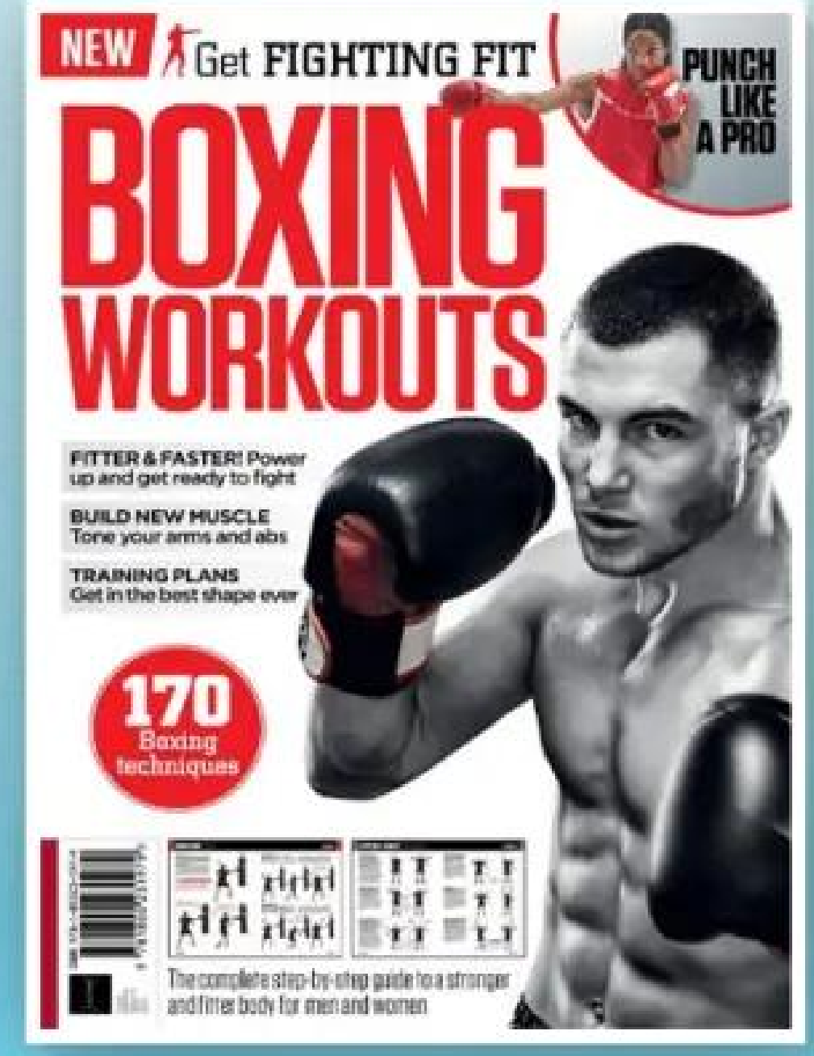
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